

REFRESHING POETRY: A MODERN APPROACH TO PLEIN AIR PAINTING AT THE
SELU NATURE PRESERVE

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in the Department of Art

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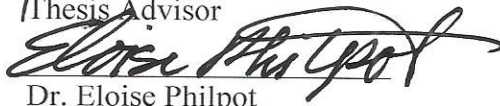
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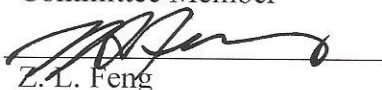
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ABSTRACT

*“Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth tremble and mountains
fall into the heart of the sea.” Psalm 43 NIV*

My thesis paintings represent contemplative time spent at the Radford University Selu Nature Preserve. A search for meaning and hope, born of frustration with the pace of modern American life, breathes fresh life into my method of plein air painting. This thesis visits artists from the West, Ruskin and Constable, and Taoist Chinese and Zen painters from the East. The healing qualities of nature as mentioned by Psychologist Rollo May and my personal history as a Mennonite have positively impacted my search. My study in painting included trips to museums in Europe where I visited seventeenth and nineteenth century Dutch paintings in Amsterdam and works by Cezanne in London. I traveled throughout Spain visiting museums, encountering a recent painting by contemporary German painter, Anselm Kiefer. Presently using large canvas, I summarize outdoor locations into just three sustaining categories: matter in the biosphere, energy, and water. I apply water and bright acrylic paint to flat canvas on site, capturing a trinity of qualities swiftly with minimal information. This initial vibrant under-painting locks outdoor freshness into bright, lively landscape paintings. My time at Selu, the expression of my poetic voice, demonstrates my place within centuries of artists asking universal questions regarding the purpose of humanity.

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Department of Arts, 2019

Radford University

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family: to my husband, Jim Moore, who supported me throughout my travels; my daughter, Karen, who sacrificed each week for three years while I commuted, painted, and devoted time to my studies and my son, Andrew, who believed in me and took time from his own university studies to guide me through computer labyrinths.

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The many people who I would like to thank for their encouragement begin with members of my family: my husband Jim Moore, my son Andrew, my sister Malinda Miller, my mother and father, Irene and Eli Miller, my brother Stan, my daughters Karen and Julia, my daughter-in-law Brittney Moore-Miller, and my niece Deanna Moore. For Lana and Andy Miller, Dr. Nate Yoder, Mim Miller, Pastor Lee Martin, Peg Martin, Sonia Eberly, Mary Louise Lehman, and other members of my Mennonite church family in Harrisonburg, who impressed upon me graduate studies as an attainable goal. Thanks to Janie and Conrad Heatwole, who shared with me, providing a second home in Radford. For the encouragement of many friends throughout my years of study, thanks to Sierra Zielinski, Elaine Blakey, Janet Loker, Betty Shenk, and members of my book club. Thanks to Barbara Camph, Jewel Yoder Hertzler, Erin Harrigan, Jamie Driver, Barbara Gautcher, Sara Lock, and the members of the Oasis artist community who kept track of my ongoing progress. Thanks to Beth Lehman, Nancy Beall, and members of my writing group for encouragement as I developed my writing. My studio class mates, Joel Gibbs, Reilly Gordon, Sherry Mahboubian, and Pam Watkins, have offered valuable insights into both painting and graduate studies. Finally, I want to acknowledge the vision and guidance of the faculty members who have been instrumental in my success at Radford, Dr. Halide Salam, Dr. Eloise Philpot, Professor ZL Feng, Dr. Roanne Barris, Professor Andrew Ross, Dr. Steve Arbury, and William Radcliff. And to Leslie Thornton-O'Brian, who facilitated my entrance for research at the Radford University Selu Conservatory.

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CHAPTER 1

SEARCHING FOR MEANING AND HOPE

I am on a search for what matters in life, for what gives life purpose. After decades living a passionate life dedicated to acts of service, I am still asking questions. I look beyond religious values that have long sustained me. My oil paintings reflect my place between this tangible, troubled psychology and the transcendent, spiritual reality in the natural environment. Quelling my anxiety about the course and pace of modern American life through painting is a way to connect to healing, enduring qualities in nature. I have spent many tranquil hours in the spacious, inspiring, ever-changing environment at Selu, contemplating both permanence and the ephemeral. This search for meaning breathes a refreshing method of plein air painting into my connection with nature.

Painting plein air style supports my search for meaning, connecting me to both what is visible and what remains difficult to understand. When I see components of an inviting outdoor location, they summarize into just three sustaining categories: matter in the biosphere, energy, and water. My recent paintings first require time to absorb these qualities. Then I apply water and bright acrylic paint to canvas at the site. I create form, make value-hue-shape choices, completely developing a vibrant under-painting. I faithfully capture these attributes with swift strokes, the broad emotional essence, giving just enough information without becoming cerebral. After locking the feeling of outdoor freshness into each painting, I finish with layers of oil paint in the studio.

CHAPTER 2

RUSKIN, CONSTABLE, AND CHINESE TAO

The Radford University Nature Preserve, Selu, is a secluded environment, well suited to contemplative introspection and uninterrupted study. Timeless qualities in natural environments inspire me as they have for artists in both Western and Eastern cultures for hundreds of years. I am adding my voice to that chorus of painters and poets that responds to the natural world. I begin by recounting, within the discipline of painting, a historic precedent to this well-traveled artistic pathway in both Europe and the Far East.

The western European perspective built around our ancient, primal, fear of nature forms the ideas of the sublime. John Ruskin (1819-1900), wrote in the mid-nineteenth century that landscape painters must mimic reality, capturing the essence while including within the paintings the experience and emotions of the artists themselves. He argued that art was the perfect channel toward truth, that in a pure landscape the artist's soul would be immortalized through his thoughtful skill and his faithful love of color (Diep 2016).

European Romantic painters and poets affirmed the inherent value of the natural world. John Constable (1776-1837) considered painting a science, learning to experience nature through careful observation. His task was to “walk through nature's fields with a humble mind.” In modern aesthetics, art and poetry remain the expression of our inner being (Graham 2004).

In fifteenth century Taoist philosophy, the scene is a framework for a vision that is invisible. Translated from Chinese, feng jing, are two words that describe “wind” and “scene” and mean landscape. Chinese infused the wind in the scene as the “breath of life.” The Chinese painter seeks to portray landscape truth both through the tangible and the abstract. The painter is not to be consumed with small matters, or meaningless detail, but to grasp the entire whole of

nature. The skilled Chinese painter creates depth by layering the structured elements, leaving the water or mist less structured (Diep 2016).

Taoist wisdom, as early as the sixth and seventh centuries, evolved into what we know now as Japanese Zen, a Buddhist sect that practiced silent meditation as a learned, “experience of nothingness.” The Zen landscape painter is to be seeking truth as a lover of nature, his goal “to still the heart and become one with the creative forces and the elements of nature” (Graham 2004).

CHAPTER 3

ROLLO MAY, THE NATURE CONNECTION

Rollo May (1909-1994), American founder of humanistic psychology, wrote on existential psychology in the mid-twentieth century. He built on the German philosopher, Nietzsche (1844-1900), questioning core values European societies had lost through the onset of commercialization and competitive individualism. In 1953, May named values lost: our sense of self, our meaning in life, and our human connection to nature. He predicted individuals would suffer various mental anxieties, a feeling of powerlessness manifesting in despair, or a surrender to some form of authoritarianism (Softas-Nall 2017).

According to Rollo May, we are part of nature; our human chemical composition is fundamentally the same as that of the air around us, the grass we walk on, and the dust we come from, to which we will ultimately return. The dimensions of our human emotions parallel the rhythms of the seasons, and when we deny that we embody nature, we are denying ourselves. May predicted that our lack of a meaningful connection to nature would impact our well-being into the twenty-first century. This connection is critical to our emotional health, our identity of ourselves as part of a greater whole and infuses life with meaning (Softas-Nall 2017).

May's Age of Anxiety has continued to explode as we experience the technological advances of the internet and the rise of social media. The industrialization of our food chain has placed individuals far from any sustaining relationship to their food sources (Wilson 1984). Although E.O. Wilson wrote in *Biophilia* that because of the innate bond humans have with the natural world, humans would continue to seek out connections to nature (Wilson 1984). The Environmental Protection Agency, at the turn of this century, estimated that only 7% of the

average American's life was spent outdoors. If we spend 93% of our life in climate-controlled comfort, how can we then connect to this natural world (Softas-Nall 2017)?

A 2013 study documented several factors instrumental in an individual's connection to nature relating to his/her optimal state of health and well-being now defined by the World Health Organization (Kamitsis 2013). This study shows several factors contributing to positive outcomes in an ability to connect with nature. Persons with a mystic or spiritually rich history are more positively impacted, and, in general, women have been shown to be more receptive than men. Also nurtured by the experience of connecting with nature are those individuals from indigenous or agrarian cultures (Kamitsis 2013).

I am descended from the Amish, the first generation whose children no longer speak the German dialect, Pennsylvania Dutch, and the second generation not to live by farming. I have always considered myself to be Mennonite, an Anabaptist Christian church, born in the sixteenth century Reformation, and an American sub-culture. This personal history sets me directly within the classifications mentioned above: female, religious, and agrarian. Nature, therefore, is a primary experience for me, a source of strength and sustenance.

CHAPTER 4

RUISDEL, CEZANNE, VAN GOGH, SPANISH ART, AND KIEFER

My study here at Radford involved numerous trips to Europe to study the paintings in museums. In Amsterdam I was drawn to Dutch landscapes of Jacob van Ruisdael (Figure 1) and seascapes of Willem Van de Velde (Figure 2). This experience, along with Vincent Van Gogh, allowed me to see modern possibilities within this classic genre. When I look at their work, I see creative composition, lively form, and an outstanding timeless technique.



Fig 1. Ruisdael, Jacob van. *Berglandschap met Waterval*. 1670



Fig 2. Van de Velde, Willem. *Eine Karg and adere Seglar bei Wind*. 1690

My work changed considerably after I visited London. The brushwork in paintings by Van Gogh (Figure 3) and Cézanne were my focus in building form and paint application. During the summer following my first year of study at Radford, I made an intensive study of Paul Cézanne, after seeing an exciting unfinished work called *Road Turning* at the Courtauld Gallery in London. Figure 4 is the photo I took of the original, and Figure 5 is one of my five studies.



Fig 3. Van Gogh, Vincent. *Long Grass with Butterflies*. 1890



Fig 4. Cézanne, Paul. *Route Tournante*. 1905



Fig 5. Miller, Lodema. *Study After Cézanne's Road Turning*. 2017

In 2017, my paintings began to focus on three things: matter, light, and water. *Study of Earth and Water* (Figure 6) is an example of my work showing how this study progressed.

Tropical Waterfall (Figure 7) shows the building of form and my use of broken color in my water, light, and land forms.



Fig 6. Miller, Lodema. *Study Earth and Water*. 2017



Fig 7. Miller, Lodema. *Tropical Waterfall*. 2017

After visiting London, Ireland, and the Netherlands alone, I traveled with other artists throughout Spain. In Summer 2018, on the Radford study abroad trip, I immersed myself in Mediterranean color by Spanish artists. I saw gardens by Joaquim Vayreda (Figure 8), the water and beaches of Joaquim Mir (Figure 9), and Joaquin Sorolla (Figure 10). The colors were bright in Spain, and the patterns were inviting.



Fig 8. Vayreda, Joaquim. *Gardens in Springtime*. 1880



Fig 9. Mir, Joaquim. *Cala Sant Vincent*. 1902



Fig 10. Sorolla, Joaquin. *El baño del Caballo*. 1909

Even the architecture was unforgettable: the many cathedrals, Basque castles, Gaudi's innovative curvilinear structures, fused with color and form. The Cubist paintings by masters in Barcelona and Madrid are reflected in my work after Spain, as seen in these 2018 paintings. *Water over Rocks* (Figure 11) is a livelier presentation of water. *Light and Hills* (Figure 12) shows a fusing of light with water in the sky, as well as the cubist influence on the landforms.



Fig 11. Miller, Lodema. *Water over Rocks*. 2018



Fig 12. Miller, Lodema. *Light and Hills*. 2018

The painting of landscapes by contemporary artists has evolved into a huge variety of work crossing all categories in painting and sculpture. In a variety of approaches, artists have created works of art involving all manner of mediums and styles, including sound and photography, sculptures, monumental video, and site installations (Gorcea 2005). In Bilbao, Spain, I stood mesmerized by the scale of a massive painting by German artist, Anselm Kiefer. Its application magnificent, *The Land of Two Rivers* (Figure 13) possessed a timeless three-dimensional physicality. It was both two- and three-dimensional, earthy in tone and color, and metallic in luminescence.



Fig 13. Kiefer, Anselm. *The Land of Two Rivers*. 1995

CHAPTER 5

PLEIN AIR: PAINTING ON SITE

In a recent video, Kiefer talks of the value and practice of “waiting” we have lost. He is fascinated with how insignificant we humans are in the course of geological time, saying, “We don’t know why we are here. We don’t know where we go. It’s quite desperate” (Cocker 2014). It looks like I am not the only artist baffled with the question of purpose. During my thesis year when I paint at Selu, I begin in nature with hours of quiet, mindful contemplation. This is when I accept the limitations of the painting medium, translating my experience connecting to nature. I look for the essential components: matter, energy, and water. I choose my subject from the compositional elements before me, looking for interesting direction in the grouping of clouds, selecting the underlying light and tones to shape my colors, determining the layout of the land, fascinated by an angled tree or branches, an arrangement of plants or rocks. I look for some indication of moisture, whether in a sky, a stream, or even plants around me.

This practice of being in nature has a grounding effect, connecting me to my innate creativity. The naked canvas is intimidating, so my first impulse is to just spend some time quieting my anxiety about the blankness of it. A toned canvas would be the same, and neutral tones would affect the vibrancy of subsequent colors. In smaller paintings, earlier in my studies, I painted directly onto the canvas with my oil paints, using traditional easel methods, laying in the composition with dark transparent washes, then applying buttery, thinned pigments on site. I finished in my studio.

Now I begin my painting with a full awareness, my presence, first connecting to the outdoor environment: touching the earth beneath me, feeling the warmth or moisture in the air, hearing wind or water moving beside me, absorbing the energy of plants and sun, always the sky

overhead, waiting patiently, breathing in the experience. Then, after musing this place, I place a large canvas flat on the ground and wet it entirely with water. The water-soaked canvas causes the acrylic paint that I apply next to pool, melt, run, merge, and soak into the canvas. I make a few mixed colors, but I also squeeze pigments directly from tubes, mixing them on the canvas, to develop form. I push the paint around with large flat brushes, knives or sticks, tilting the canvas to create runs. With vibrant color, I directly translate the energy and mood of the outdoor experience, adding more pigment and water until the piece is completely developed, using the visual tools in my painter's cache. This recent development forces me to make nimble decisions about what is essential, which principles I will emphasize, using my right-brained knowledge of painting without getting trapped into academic, left-brained theory.

Vincent Van Gogh wrote to his friend Emile Bernard:

I follow no system of brushwork at all. I hit the canvas with irregular strokes, which I leave as they are, impastos, uncovered spots of canvas-corners here and there left unfinished; reworkings, roughness, always working directly on location. I try to capture the essence in the drawing. Then I fill in the spaces demarcated by the outlines (expressed or not) but felt in every case. (Jansen 2007)

While I do not outline a drawing, my aim is also to capture the essence felt on the spot while covering the canvas. The bright acrylic paint infuses vast amounts of positive energy as I work rapidly from all sides of the canvas. At this stage, I am not limited to managing tedious layering or thoughtful application of transparent oil paint. The water fuses the detail and intricacies of the natural environment. Very quickly I veer into various levels of abstraction, lured by the elasticity and viscosity of the paint itself, finding my centered awareness, losing my self-conscious apprehension. It is a physically demanding work with kneeling, bending, crouching, and looking at it from all angles. Painting on the ground is a different experience from painting on an easel. I paint with broad sweeps of wide brushes, scrubbing or scraping back to

the canvas, smoothing flowing watery areas, creating and moving shapes, making an active surface using bold color.

I am tapping into what excites me about my surroundings, not the details, not adhering to accuracy in the rules governing landscape painting (i.e., foreground, middle ground, background, or even presenting the horizon). If they need to be seen I show them, but they do not hold me prisoner. I want my viewers to feel the wetness of the water, the majesty and sparkle of snow, to touch how high is the sky, or to feel the earth that grounds me. I want my paintings to be alive with light, the energy of our natural world, with my own stooped, bent, kneeling, life energy poured into it. Before I leave the site, I take photographs and make small pencil sketches of the subject with any details I may need to reference later. Back at my studio, I expand and solidify all the excitement and strength of the original impression responding to the under-painting already captured.

In *Selu Summer* (Figure 14), my goal was to show how inviting the path was through some very tall trees. In *Autumn Ebullition* (Figure 15), I was conflicted between showing a huge rock and the tops of trees, the autumn leaves blowing high above me.



Fig 14. Miller, Lodema. *Selu Summer*. 2018



Fig 15. Miller, Lodema. *Autumn Ebullition*. 2018

CHAPTER 6

FINDING MY PAINTING VOICE

Throughout this three-year study at Radford University, I have had many questions with few answers about myself, the validity of my life purpose, or my work as an artist. I have been on a quest to discard ideas, practices, and attitudes that no longer nourish my spirit or my place in the world, to make new connections. My time while at Selu, plein air painting this last year, quieted my anxieties while I have found my painting style there (i.e., my voice). My research confirms I am not alone among artists in this search for meaning in life. Kiefer says, “Artists make connections of things that are separated, that art is fluid, changing, like a river” (Cocker 2014).

What matters most in landscapes, those elements that support artists, poets, and spiritual seekers of truth in nature are the earth, wind or light energy, and water. I have become comfortable with limitations transcribing my experience through paint, while still honoring the validity of faithfully doing this work. The connection to nature nourishes my spirit. It strengthens me for the journey of life to ingest nature’s qualities, to echo them on a canvas, to see my experience documented in full fruition. My canvases have become larger, using vibrant Spanish yellow, orange, or bright pastel tints to express light energy. I find a full range of cool Dutch colors to convey the properties of water. Rich earth tones of under-painting ground all my paintings. Whether viewers see or feel what I experience may differ, for each of us bring our own experience of nature to any landscape (Thweatt Spring 2000).

I speak my language through paintings, giving life to them, bright colors, broken patterns, and energetic movement in my compositions. This process of reflecting, creating, and painting at Selu has nurtured my connection to nature and given me hope. The vertical portrait

format, using rectangular canvas, expresses my desire to begin around me with perceived observations, extending upward toward the limits of our universe, currently beyond any comprehension. I also venture into square formats when emphasizing the extension or merging of the elements between earth and atmosphere as in my snowscapes, *Snow Series #1* (Figure 16) and *Snow Series #4* (Figure 17).



Fig 16. Miller, Lodema. *Snow Series #1*. 2019



Fig 17. Miller, Lodema. *Snow Series #4*. 2019

CHAPTER 7

Plates of Figures

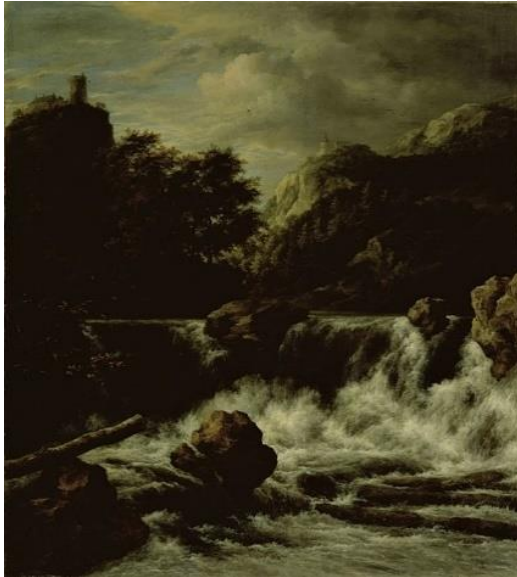


Figure 1. van Ruisdael, Jacob. *Berglandschap Waterfall*, 1673.



Figure 2. van de Welde, Willem. *Eine Karg und andere Seglar bei Wind*, 1690.



Figure 3. Van Gogh, Vincent. *Field of Grass with Butterflies and Flowers*, 1890.



Figure 4. Cézanne, Paul. *Turning Road (Route Tournante)*, circa 1905.



Figure 5. Miller, Lodema. *Study After Cézanne's Road Turning*, 2017.



Figure 6. Miller, Lodema. *Study Earth and Water*, 2017.



Figure 7. Miller, Lodema. *Tropical Waterfall*, 2018.



Figure 8. Vayreda, Joaquim. *Gardens in Springtime*, circa 1880.



Figure 9. Mir, Joaquim. *Cala Sant Vincent*, 1902.



Figure 10. Sorolla, Joaquim. *El baño del Caballo*, 1909.



Figure 11. Miller, Lodema. *Water over Rocks*, 2018.

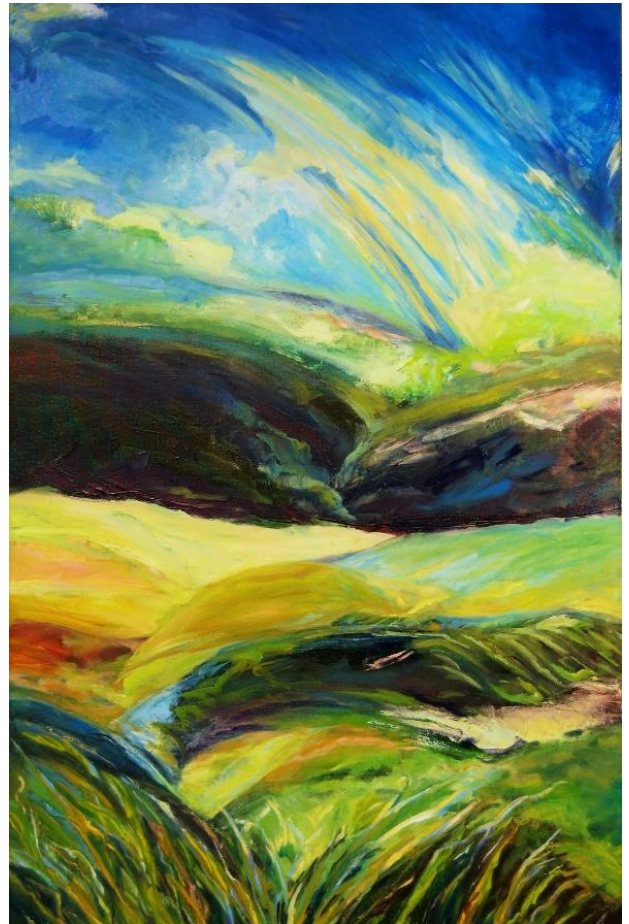


Figure 12. Miller, Lodema. *Light and Hills*, 2018.



Figure 13. Kiefer, Anselm. *The Land of Two Rivers*, 1995.



Figure 14. Miller, Lodema. *Selu Summer*, 2018.

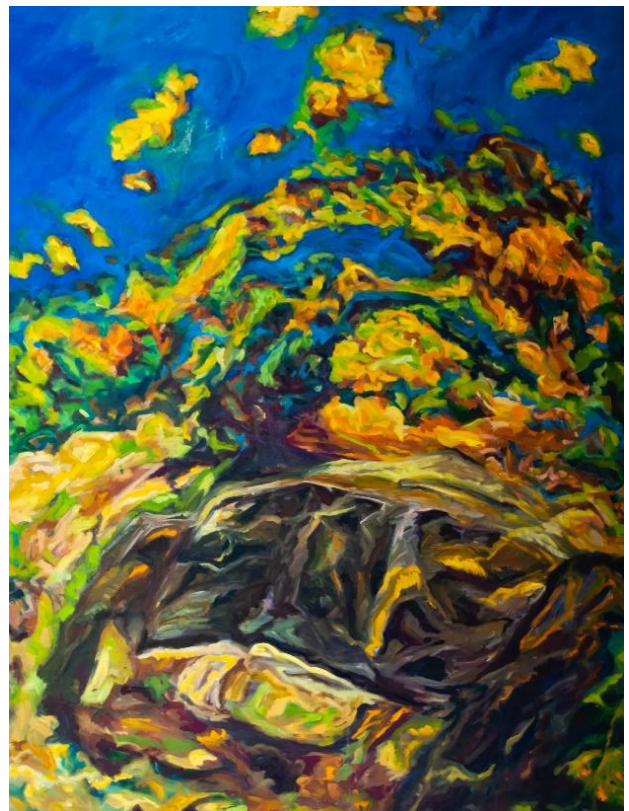


Figure 15. Miller, Lodema. *Autumn Ebullition*, 2018.



Figure 16. Miller, Lodema. *Snow Series #1*, 2019.



Figure 17. Miller, Lodema. *Snow Series #4*, 2019.

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