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Ode-cean: California

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Ode-cean: California

by

Danny-Olivia Hanson

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Portland State University

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Introduction: Art, Science, and Nature

There is a unique space between science and the arts that is open for interdisciplinary connection. Art and science are commonly seen as separate, even opposing disciplines, and while this has been challenged in recent years, there is more cross-communication to be done by artists and scientists alike. As an artist with an interest in the natural world, I feel compelled to contribute to filling this space with my perspective.

Since I was a child, I have been fascinated with the world around me. I was interested in outer space, and delighted and frightened in equal measure by black holes. I often watched the sunset with my mother, and became interested in the clouds that created such captivating patterns in the sky. However, my most ardent love became living beings. In elementary school, I was obsessed with bugs, flowers, and stray cats. As my education progressed, I remember learning that the kingdoms of life are divided into phylums, classes, orders, families, genuses, and finally, species. This careful division intrigued me and I began wondering how the branches of life differed from one another. I went on many a Wikipedia deep dive about my favorite plants and animals, carefully memorizing their phylums, and learning what separated them from similar species. Over the course of this project, my interest moved from deep dives about individual species to research about ecosystems and environments, and I began to realize that many living beings were more similar than different. The fracturing of life into specific categories lost the sparkle that initially captivated me, and I wondered: how is everything connected? Parasites, symbiotic relationships, and keystone species became my fixation next. Now, my interest as an artist lies in the representation of ecosystems and interspecies relationships.

Alongside my journey as a nature-lover, has been my journey of cultural reconnection as a Person of Color adopted into a primarily white family. I am Mexican-American, while my

father is white, and my mother is half-white, half Mexican. Over the past two years, I have been learning about Mexican history and culture, and while this does not play a substantial role in the content of my project, my learning did influence my thought process as I worked. Because Mexico, like the United States and many other places, is the victim of settler colonialism, a part of my reconnection process has been attempting to decolonize my worldview. In the context of *Ode-cean: California*, this has meant reconsidering how I, and humans as a whole, relate to and impact the natural world. It is a settler colonialist idea that humans and nature are inherently separate, and that the best thing we can do for nature is leave it alone (Bacon).

I am also reacting to the work of 19th century German science illustrator, Ernst Haeckel. A part of trying to decolonize my thinking was being skeptical of the white artists that I like, and he was one of my early influences for sea creature artwork. Upon researching, I learned that Haeckel was a eugenicist, and believed in a hierarchy of the natural world that placed white, western men at the top (Kaizor). His work directly contributed to the idea that humans and nature are inherently separate, and the way that he depicted living things severed them from their environments. Many of his illustrations present living creatures with plain black or white backgrounds, and almost never interacting with other living beings. They appear to be suspended in space, perfectly arranged so that their most detailed parts are the focal point of the composition. This stark, harsh representation allowed European scientists at the time to collect specimens with no concern for how they would impact the ecosystems they were taking from (Kazior). I was horrified when I read about the impact that his work had, and I was shocked that I hadn't learned about his ideology sooner, considering how ubiquitous his prints are. His popularity is concerning, but I believe that if more artists with different ideologies create artwork about the natural world, society as a whole can gain a new perspective.

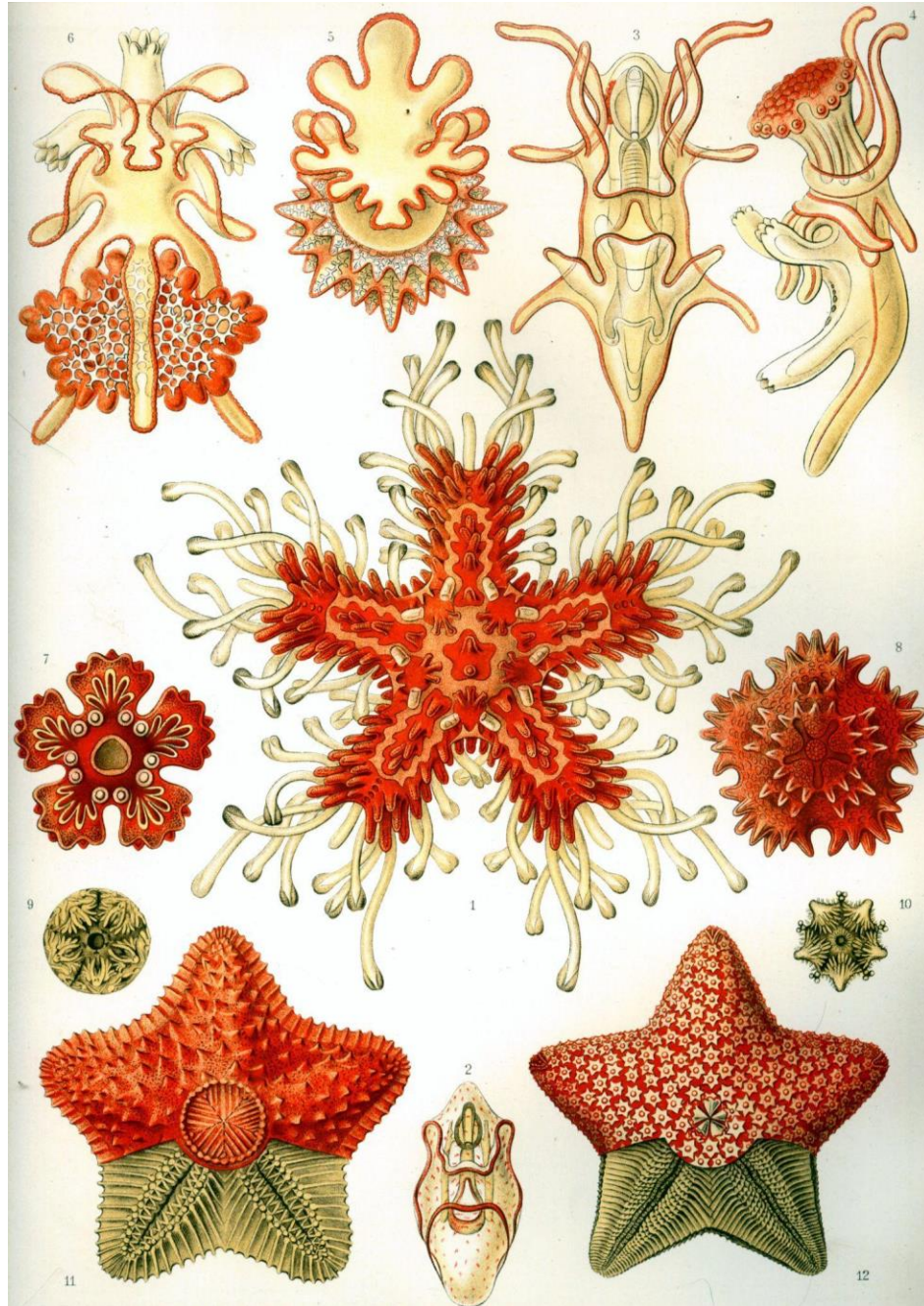


Figure 1 Haeckel, Ernst. "Asteridea." Wikimedia Commons, 20 Feb. 2006,

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/archive/5/5a/20180922054056%21Haeckel_Asteridea.jpg. Accessed 20 May

2022. The 40th plate from Ernst Haeckels "Kunstformen der Natur" (1904)

I want to emphasize that humans are a part of nature, and that everything is interconnected. Beyond the work of Haeckel, I am reacting to two other relevant aspects of the idea that humans and nature are inherently separate. Some artists portray nature as idyllic and ripe for exploring, such as German-American landscape artist Albert Bierstadt. Artwork created from this perspective, particularly landscape artwork, is suspiciously lacking in human-impact, which creates space for the ideology that humans have no effect on the world around them. Having such a romantic viewpoint can allow audiences to ignore the very real issues that come about from exploiting the environment, such as pollution and climate change.



Figure 2 Bierstadt, Albert. Among the Sierra Nevada, California. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C. , 1868,

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.

Others take a bleak stance and choose to show only the negative consequences of human behavior. I find this style of artwork to be catastrophic, and somewhat resigned in tone. While I do not want to discount the negative impact that humans have had on the environment, this

viewpoint can cause apathy as a response to overwhelm. It may seem as though artwork emphasizing the worst ways that humans have interacted with Earth is the most helpful in terms of environmentalism, but it still feeds into ideologies that present humans as separate from nature. I am interested in taking a different perspective, and my goal is to approach depicting the environment with nuance and care.



*Figure 3 Mac, Nic. "THE GREAT PLASTIC WAVE." Nic Mac Illustration, 2020,
<https://www.nicmacillustration.com/#/thegreatplasticwave/>. Accessed 20 May 2022.*

My Artwork: Processes, History, and Personal Influence

For my thesis project, I created a series of five mixed media drawings depicting Californian ocean ecosystems, with the overarching theme of interconnectivity. This idea is based off of an

earlier project that I conceptualized for my Advanced Drawing and Mixed Media class during my spring term of 2021. At the time, I was still enchanted by the categories of life, so I chose to explore the five kingdoms: Plant, Animal, Fungi, Protist, and Bacteria. I wanted to focus on the ocean to further specify my theme; I drew a giant pacific octopus, giant kelp, red algae, an underwater mushroom, and a common aquatic bacteria. I finished a series of five 8"x11" studies, as well as two 18"x24" pieces. I continued to work on one of the 18"x24" pieces—a mixed media piece depicting a giant pacific octopus that was initially named "Enteroctopus dofleini" but renamed "Motherhood" in 2022—and it made its way into my final project.



Figure 4 Hanson, Danny, "Motherhood", 2022, 18"x24", Gouache, water based brush pen, micron pen

The new title, "Motherhood," makes reference to the fact that this is a female octopus safe-guarding her eggs. She is dying, hence the purple and gray color palette I have chosen for her. When female octopi lay their eggs, they will spend months with them, using the suction cups on their legs to gently blow water over them. Not only is she giving them fresh oxygen by doing this, but she is also defending them against predators as she stays with her eggs in the cave.

Because she is so dedicated to protecting them, she doesn't even eat, and when her babies finally hatch, the mother octopus will die of starvation, having sacrificed herself for them (“Mother Octopus Makes the Ultimate Sacrifice for Her Babies.”)

This is a beautiful process that challenges the idea that invertebrates aren't social animals. Though neither I, nor any scientist that I know of, can truly know for certain what the octopus is thinking or feeling throughout these many months, I can't help but feel touched by this behavior. It seems to me that the octopus is acting out of love. My hope for viewers looking at this piece is for them to ponder why I might name it "Motherhood," and to learn about octopus behavior. There is also a secondary meaning of the title, as this is the first piece I created for this project, and in a sense the rest were "birthed" from this one.

My initial plan was to build off of the work I had done in my previous class and continue exploring the five kingdoms of life. However, as I began creating studies for my thesis, I realized that I was interested in the connections between the living things I was depicting and their environments, rather than the boxes created by looking exclusively at sections of life. I liked that the living beings I was researching had unique roles in their ecosystems, and that they were connected to other species in some way or another. As I researched the subjects of my drawings, the more I understood how interconnected the natural world is.



Figure 5 Hanson, Danny, "Kelp Forest", 2022, 18"x24", Gouache, water based brush pen, paint pen, micron pen

"Kelp Forest" was initially supposed to be specifically focused on the giant kelp I drew. However, following my epiphany regarding interconnectivity, I decided to change my focus from structured sections of life to ecosystems and environments. In this piece, I depict blue perch, barnacles, a bat star, and sea urchins along with the kelp. The sea urchins especially are important in this piece because they eat giant kelp and have the capacity to clear entire kelp forests (Chrobak). I wanted to include a few different species in this work because kelp forests have very high biodiversity, and act as a habitat for many more species than the ones I depicted. It also seemed especially fitting for this project that the subject of the work, the kelp, is both a habitat and an organism in its own right.

Each of the pieces of mixed media work that I completed for *Ode-cean: California* focus specifically on Californian marine ecosystems. I chose to focus on California specifically because it is my home state, and this project was partially born out of homesickness and nostalgia. Coming to Portland for college was a bigger adjustment than I expected. I struggled with homesickness, disorientation, and seasonal affect disorder. During my first year of college, I called both of my parents almost every day. I was so much more afraid of being on my own than I had realized, and I fantasized about being home with them more often than not. Spending most Saturdays on a sunny beach had been a huge part of my family's life each summer as well, and coming to cold, rainy Portland was hard on my mental health. My second year of college was even more difficult for me, and I found myself asking the universe for any reason at all to go home. I remembered the times as a child that I went to the Monterey Bay Aquarium with my parents, and imagining the smell of the Monterey Bay itself was one of the only coping mechanisms I had. The ocean became a spiritual anchor for me, and I obsessively watched the jellyfish livestream set up by the official Monterey Bay Aquarium YouTube channel to pretend I was sitting in front of the tank like a kid again.

When the pandemic hit, I was overjoyed to return home. I spent spring of 2020 through summer of 2021 in California, and a great deal of the work I produced in this time period was about the joy and euphoria of being home. This project was conceptualized during this period of my life. As a thank you to California, and maybe the universe as well, I researched the native marine wildlife of the Bay Area and began to create artwork about it. For my 21st birthday, I even visited the Monterey Bay Aquarium with my family, and I felt like I was healing from the trauma of being away from home.

Returning to Portland for my senior year was a very risky decision on my part. My mental health had been so poor the last time, and I was afraid that I would be miserable again. This time around though, I had my sea creatures, and the project I started in Spring of 2021 became a symbol of perseverance for me.

Perseverance is a specific theme in my drawing "Otters, Otters, Otters" as well. Sea otters are native to the Pacific Ocean and can be found in the Monterey Bay. They were hunted to near extinction for their dense pelts in the 1800s and were completely extinct from the area for nearly 200 years (Cannon). However, due to conservation efforts, they have slowly repopulated the area, and in recent years sea otter rafts—groups of sea otters—have been spotted off of the coast for the first time since the 1900s. This is huge cause for celebration, and I hope to capture this joy in "Otters, Otters, Otters." I like to think of this drawing as a representation of my creative rejuvenation as well, as I am celebrating a return of my own happiness and confidence.



Figure 6 Hanson, Danny "Otters, Otters, Otters", 2022, 36" x 15", water-based brush pen, micron pen, paint pen on paper

Spring 2021 was also a very generative time for me creatively. I had little to do besides school because COVID-19 restrictions were still firmly in place in my hometown in California. The CDC recommended that non-essential workers remain home, and since I had no job, I spent a lot of time sitting at my dining room table drawing.

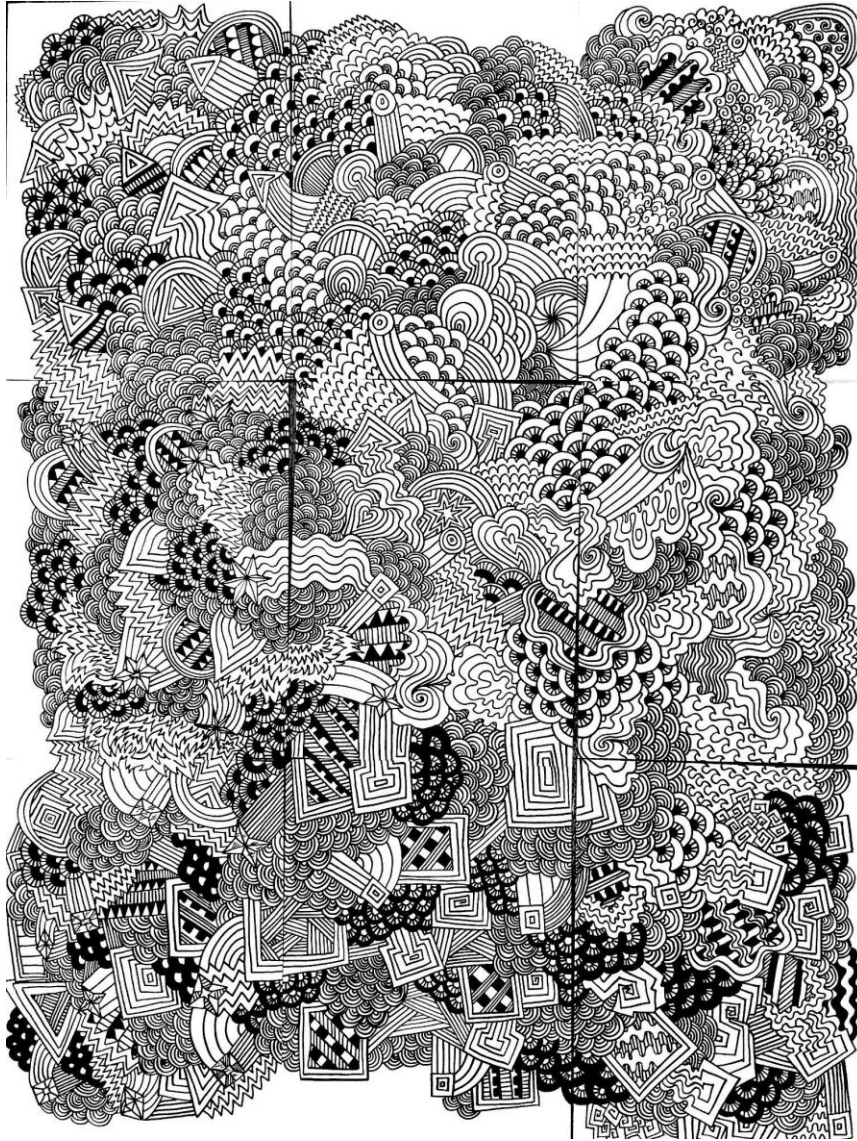


Figure 7 Hanson, Danny, "Elemental", 2021, 27"x36", Sharpie on mixed media paper

"Elemental" was a project that I created as an early attempt to represent the four classical elements: Earth, Water, Fire, and Air. At the time that I made this project, I had been watching a television show called "Avatar: The Last Airbender" on Netflix. Part of the set-up for the show is that most of the characters have magical abilities which allow them to control one of the four elements, and I spent a lot of time thinking about what personality traits, aesthetics, and colors were associated with each one. I was also drawing a lot of abstract patterns at the time, and I began to correlate certain shapes with the elements. For example, I started with squares representing earth, circles representing air, and stars representing fire. Most of these associations came to me in dreams or right before I fell asleep rather than logical thought processes. I then built off of these shapes, and thought about what type of lines might match each element as well. Some of the linework was more representational, such as waves for water, while some of it was conceptual, such as rigidity and structure for earth.



Figure 8 Hanson, Danny, "Earth" 2021, 9"x12", Sharpie on mixed media paper

The method that I developed to depict "earth" became the baseline for the patterning that I used to convey rocks within *Ode-cean: California*. This style of geometric patterning was very satisfying for me, in part because I felt like I hadn't developed an art style that was distinct to me at that point in my practice. These patterns are especially evident in "Tidepool", which is almost entirely abstract pattern with a few sea creatures.

Out of all of the pieces in *Ode-cean: California*, it was the most work in terms of detail and time commitment. At the time that I made it, it was the most ambitious piece I had ever attempted due to the size of the paper, the density of detail, coloring technique, and inclusion of sea animals that I had never focused on before. I took a lot of skills I learned from "Elemental" into the linework, as well as the coloring techniques from "Motherhood." I also tried my hand at layering the patterns for the rocks to create a sense of depth.

"Tidepool" was also a breakthrough drawing for *Ode-cean: California*. I had only created "Kelp Forest" and "Motherhood" when I began "Tidepool," and I was losing interest landscape compositions. I wanted my project to have more visual diversity, so I oriented this piece vertically. I also crowded the space as much as I possibly could, since "Kelp Forest" especially seemed to have a lot of places for the eye to rest.



Figure 9 Hanson, Danny, "Tidepool", 2022, 18"x24", Water based brush pen, micron pen, paint pen

After "Elemental", I wasn't quite through with drawing my two dimensional abstract patterns, but I was wondering if I could incorporate them into other contexts beyond filling a page.

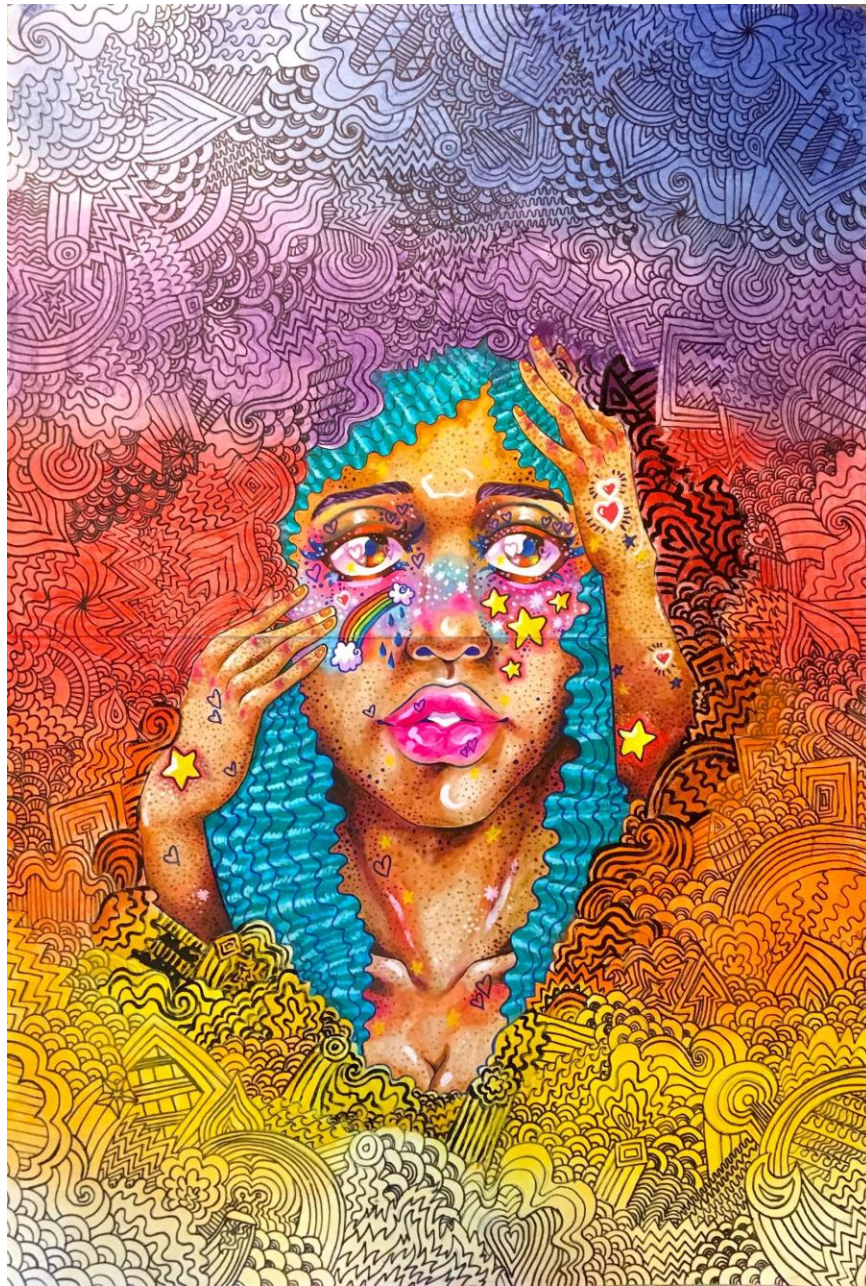


Figure 10 Hanson, Danny, "Emergence", 2021, 36"x48", Water colored pencil, water based marker, alcohol based marker, screen printing ink, oil pastel, chalk pastel, acrylic paint pen.

"Emergence" was an important study for me because I was able to think of my usual flat abstract patterns as three-dimensional. I began to imagine how they might feel to touch, and how they might look in relation to a human figure. Most of my work until 2022 has had a strong focus on pattern and portraiture. I have always wanted to incorporate plants and animals into my practice, but I have been intimidated by thinking that I must create totally realistic portrayals. By experimenting with abstraction and stylization in "Elemental" and "Emergence", I have found a comfortable place to begin depicting the natural world. Within my practice, this means abstraction of the landscape, inclusion of geometric patterns, and bright colors. When approaching abstraction, I want to keep my subjects recognizable, but I also want the viewer to get lost in my images. I think that using the intense detail of abstract geometric patterns will get a viewer completely immersed in my work. I also tend to saturate my work very heavily, and use harmonious color schemes. My hope is that these techniques will create a visual language that is distinct and recognizably mine.



Figure 11 Hanson, Danny, "The Gyre", 2022, 30.25" x 16.75", water-based brush pen, micron pen, paint pen

While I feel that every piece in *Ode-cean: California* fulfills my wish of having a unique, deliberate style, "The Gyre" is especially well developed. In composing it I gave myself more technical drawing problems than any piece I've worked on before, such as how to layer the garbage, the perspective of the waterline, and the translucency of the plastic bottles at the top and plastic bags at the bottom. The fishing line and plastic bags especially feel like a perfect halfway point between the abstraction and representation. "The Gyre" combined all of the skills I learned in each of the pieces I completed. I translated the fishing line into the language of pattern in a similar way that I did to the kelp in "Kelp Forest", I worked with an incredible density of detail like in "Tidepool", and I played with perspective in the same way that I did with "Otters, Otters, Otters." Choosing not to include a waterline in it was an important step for me because I had initially been planning on having a strong waterline, but I loved how disorienting it was to look at "Otters, Otters, Otters", and I decided that the visual connection between them was a good way to call back to the theme of interconnectivity.

I find myself getting emotional as I look at this drawing. It is the final piece in *Ode-cean: California*, and therefore it marks the end of my time at Portland State University. It is a technical success for me, and I proved to myself that I could persevere through difficult compositions when I completed this. Prior to completing "The Gyre" I was too intimidated by the complexity of layering to attempt it in my drawings. I had never struggled so much to come up with a pattern the way that I did for the trash at the top of the drawing. I had never incorporated so many recognizable inanimate objects into my art before. Overall, I am incredibly proud of the work I have done, and how I have grown as an artist.

Moving Forward

I cannot think of a more satisfying close to my time as a BFA student than completing *Ode-cean: California*. I feel like I will be closing the chapter of my life during which I was in so much pain that I could only deliriously pray to return home. My meditation on sea creatures and artistic process were the only things that kept me sane, and to look back on my determination to turn my pain into beauty fills me with pride. I will continue to do the work of decolonizing my mindset as well, and I look forward to the day that I can look at this project as the beginning of a process instead of an end.

I grew my artistic skillset substantially with this work, as I took more time on each of these drawings than I have ever taken on other projects. I learned that I can work with even denser detail than I had before, and that I can envision artwork in different sizes and shapes. I learned that I love the style that I depict the natural world in. I learned that I love the sea more than I ever knew before.

It is incredibly exciting to think that I can use these new skills for future work, and I may even create more "Ode-ceans" as I develop further as an artist. My takeaways from my own work has been that am more hard working than I knew, that I have a great deal of inner strength, and that I may always lean upon my spiritual connection to the world around me in times of hardship.

Farewell.

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