

Our Exquisite Pollution

Artist Statement

Sandra Hansen

When thousands of fish died in Lake Erie in 2014 (Alexander G.J. Driedger 2015), I began investigating water damage in local waterways, the Great Lakes and the Pacific Gyre. I learned that on a tiny island wildlife refuge in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, tens of thousands of pounds of new garbage piles up every year. Ships cause 20% of the garbage while 80% comes from litter, industrial discharges, and garbage mismanagement (Alexander G.J. Driedger 2015). My research convinced me to become an environmental artist.

Environmental or Eco Art is a relatively new art movement. It is unique to other art movements in a number of ways. It is based on participation so that art making is redefined in terms of social relatedness and ecological healing (Weintraub 2012). In Linda Weintraub's book, *To Life*, she outlined the parameters of what it means to be an Eco artist. Weintraub says that artists must make connections with ecologists or environmentalists, deal with the changeability of biodegradable mediums, and accept that the survival of the earth is more important than human desires for commodities. To be considered an art movement, Weintraub says that artwork must correlate with changes that are happening in the society at that time and the novelty in the art must be synchronized with the extent and intensity of these changes. For instance, the artists' mediums might be brand new, such as creating art with bronze or lasers when they were first invented. Weintraub says that Eco art is a vanguard art since it is correlated with changes in the way society must deal with the environment in order for life to continue in its present state. She also points out that Eco art is using new and unexpected materials, processes, themes, and it is often characterized by its tremendous size that was heretofore impossible (Weintraub 2012).

How much waste is created in the making of the artwork is another concern for Eco artists. As many Eco artists stopped using traditional toxic art supplies they began to use more repurposed

materials. I found inspiration from one such artist, Julie Brookman. Her *Limited Expansion Machete* was made from a group of lit plastic bags piled in a corner (Sea of Expansion, a Subtly Ironic Reminder of our Environmental Impact n.d.). This art appears to be referencing Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled, Corner of Bacci*, which is a pile of Bacci candies, and viewers are encouraged to take one. Gonzalez's art spoke to the daily loss culminating in the death of his lover, Ross, from AIDS during the 1980s AIDS epidemic. While I could not find any written evidence definitively linking Brookman's *Limited Expansion Machete* to Gonzalez-Torres' *Corner of Bacci*, I thought about how Gonzalez-Torres was referring to the loss of a lover, while Brookman's *Limited Expansion Machete* spoke to me about the loss of our natural environment.

My first environmental piece was the Ganges River. I began making it even before deciding to become an Eco artist. I had worked in India on twelve different occasions on art projects and have a personal affection for the Ganges River as I painted along its banks numerous times and numerous locations in the country. The Ganges River is sacred and revered and is a goddess. It is said to purify everything that is dipped into it. Along the banks of the rivers cremation fires burn dead Hindu practitioners. Their ashes and bones are put into the river to send them to Nirvana. This is the end of birth and rebirth for Hindus. However, where once dolphins had swum the river is now extremely polluted from industrial chemicals, litter, icons from religious ceremonies, and human waste. I had become sick from the water on many occasions as well.

To create the *Ganges River* sculpture I infused epoxy resin into various polyester and cotton fabrics. I then formed the fabric over obstacles to create the idea of river currents. When the fabric dried and hardened I put them together forming an altar to the Ganges River. The altar is about 8 feet long and three feet wide and two and a half feet tall. Among the currents of the river are marigold garlands used by worshipers to praise the Ganges. The altar also carries the trash, religious

artifacts, and the bones of human remains in it. The Ganges River is symbolic of the pure and natural mixed together with the pollution and waste on our earth.

While creating the Ganges River piece I created a second piece called *Sky*. While we most often think of water in lakes, rivers, oceans, and faucets; water is all around us. Water falls from the sky in many ways from rain to snow, hail, and sleet. However, natural and artificial pollutants with elevated hydrogen levels cause the precipitation to become acidic. The acidic water is dangerous to plants, people, animals and corroded steel. The elevated hydrogen levels are caused by [sulfur dioxide](#) and [nitrogen oxide](#) emissions, reacting with the [water molecules](#) in the [atmosphere](#). (Wikipedia n.d.) While the acid rain and snow can be naturally occurring, by far the majority of it is caused by coal burning and other human produced activity (Wikipedia n.d.). While the acidic rain causes damage to items like statues and bridges, it also falls or is swept into the rivers and lakes making them more acidic, which causes damage to aquatic life (Wikipedia n.d.). Thus the cycle of life of rivers rushing into the oceans, evaporating and rising into the sky where it turns into precipitation and returns to the earth is corrupted by pollution in both air and water.

While the *Sky* piece is not about plastics in the water, it is about artificial additives in the water that damage people and the earth. *Sky* is made in the same method as the *Ganges River* piece. The primary material used in *Sky* is a nylon sari that I wore for my wedding in 1974. In 1974 most Indian women wore saris of natural fabrics such as cotton and silk. Since the 1960s and 1970s however, polyester, nylon, and other manmade fabrics have become common both in the US and India. The sari is also one of the earliest types of clothing being an unstitched wrapped garment. The use of the sari for the sky speaks to the changes from the natural to the artificial world, from the natural materials to the plastic and artificial materials and from women the creators of life who nurture children, people, and the earth. The whole world can be seen in this one simple sculptural piece called *Sky*.

As I began studying water pollution I became increasingly alarmed at the huge amounts of plastics in the water. According to Alexander Driedger, author of “Plastic debris in the Laurentian Great Lakes: A review,” published in the *Journal of Great Lakes Research*, plastic breaks down through UV radiation, wave action, and biodegradation. However at the microscopic level complete degradation may take hundreds or even thousands of years. As the plastic breaks down marine animals are more likely to ingest them. (Mark Browne 2010). This problem is compounded by toxins, which are attracted like a magnet to plastics and adhere to the surface of the plastic. As the plastics break into microscopic and microplastic debris they release the toxic chemicals used in manufacturing them as well as the toxins that have become attached to the surface of the plastic (Sun 2014). The result is that phthalates, nonylphols, bisphenol (BPA and the similar BPS), heavy metals, and polybrominated diphenyl ethers enter into the water. BPA is now found in all of the world’s oceans and 90 % of the earth’s people (Sun 2014). These chemicals can interfere with endocrine systems of aquatic life impeding both their reproductive and developmental health (Alexander G.J. Driedger 2015). In humans BPAs and BPSs cause early puberty, brain disorders, and behavior disorders in young children, as well as an increase in cancers (Sun 2014). Fish and birds eat the toxic plastics, which then go into humans who eat the fish and drink the water (Sun 2014). In 2012 Lisbeth Van Cauwenberghe calculated that twenty-eight million tons of plastic bags find their way into our oceans, lakes and waterways each year and this number is growing exponentially (Lisbeth Van Cauwenberghe 2013). These micro plastics are often transported thousands of miles to the Pacific gyre and the other vortexes in each sea and ocean in the world (Sun 2014).

The more I immersed myself in studying water pollution the more my art processes began to change. Abstracted water became the motif in all of my art, whether it was in the form of waves, bubbles, rivers, fish, or the sea. Where I had previously painted fish mired in polluted algae water using oil paints on Masonite supports, I now wanted to use more environmentally friendly or repurposed materials. Because polyethylene bags have an intrinsic beauty in them my “plastic bag

paintings” were both aesthetically pleasing yet spoke to the horrific problem of plastics filling the oceans. These plastic bag paintings took an average of 300 to 500 plastic bags out of the environment so I felt that I was doing some good with them. I also enjoyed the dichotomy of creating something reminiscent of natural water from repurposed artificial materials. Like many Eco artists before me I was working with repurposed and new media but still using the old paradigm of the aesthetics of beauty in art.

Of the paintings that I have created with plastic bags thus far, *Wave Diptych* is the finest example and alludes to the adage that “the medium is the message (McLuhan 1964).”

Each plastic bag represents the buying choices that we make and the horrific quandary of single use plastic products. Through wind and wave action toxins are released as each of these bags breaks down into micro plastics. With its swirling wave action, *Wave Diptych* shows the breaking down of plastics into smaller and smaller pieces while releasing toxic chemicals into the water in the process. Its chromatic colors allude to the artificial and synthetic dyes that surround us.

To create the *Wave Diptych* logos and seams were cut out of thin walled plastic grocery bags and newspaper bags. Each bag was then cut into organic shapes and spread with gel medium. The plastic was built up layers upon layers on a sheet of plastic much as oil paints are glazed onto a support. The thin plastic is translucent allowing one to see through the intricate layers. Some acrylic paints and fabric were used in the piece as well.

The *Braided River* is a plastic bag sculpture. To emphasize the enormity of the plastic bag problem in the water, this piece is 15 feet tall and at least 8 feet wide at its base. Made from plastic bags it shows the dichotomy of creating something real from artificial materials. Braided rivers are naturally occurring phenomena that are created from a river carrying too much sediment for its velocity (Hansen 2016). This can happen when a swiftly flowing mountain river flows onto a plain and slows down. The sediments are dumped on the plains and the river flows around it creating many streams and rivulets joining and separating back and forth like extremely loosely braided hair

(Hansen 2016). As we create and use more and more plastics they flow like a river into the oceans.

The Braided River is made of numerous braids of plastic bags, which progresses towards the ocean joining together and pulling apart and finally rushing into rapids or waves spilling onto the floor and walkway while dumping at least 300-500 plastic bags and visually demonstrating how we are wallowing in our plastics, as well as polluting the oceans and seas.

Working with repurposed plastics and gel mediums did not feel very environmentally sound to me however. I had problems controlling the plastics from spring winds flitting plastic bits out the open door of my studio and into my garden. The gel medium would get on my clothes and be washed into the water system when the clothes were cleaned. My next environmentally sound step was to create art that could decay and be naturally reabsorbed into the earth rather than to try to artificially halt degradation forever. I took the papermaking class with Danielle Wycoff and learned to make paper. Still wanting to continue with my plastic in water motifs I infused polyethylene bag pieces into the paper to show the dissonance of the natural and the artificial mixed together. I have been experimenting with combining other mediums in the paper such as marbling ink, acrylic paint, and strings while continuing to play with water pollution themes with waves, rivers and bubbles.

Desiring to work large scale I made a paper mold and vat to make paper that was up to 34 x 82 inches in size. I experimented with kozo, Japanese gampi, iris leaves from my garden as well as other paper pulps. Instead of the plastic based PEO favored by many papermakers I began experimenting with natural ingredients such as okra and aloe.

In papermaking water became not just a motif, but a physical aspect of my art that needed to be dealt with. Such a large papermaking vat needed a lot of water to make paper. I fitted the vat with a drain and a large tub underneath so that I could recycle the water back and forth with a pump. More clean water was added as the water was used or evaporated. Since my studio doesn't have plumbing, when the winter arrived the snow covered my garden hose rendering it useless. I contemplated carrying many large buckets from my kitchen across the yard to my studio, an arduous

task for someone who cannot lift heavy loads. As I shoveled the walk to my studio one morning I realized that all the snow was free clean water. I shoveled it into the tubs in my studio. A visiting environmental engineer told me to put a cup bleach in the water once a month to get rid of bacteria so that the water was clean enough to use. He also suggested pumping the water through a hose and into a drain where it would go to the wastewater treatment plant rather than dumping it in my garden where chemicals could leach into the ground water. Thus I have found my way into creating a more ecologically sound, biodegradable art with natural and repurposed materials and few wasteful byproducts. These abstracted water themed pieces of art can be either functional hanging in front of a window as a shade or on the wall like a tapestry. Each piece speaks to the beauty of water and the importance of caring for our water both in the abstract and in practice.

In learning to become a more environmentally sound artist and human I discovered a Facebook page called *Journey to Zero Waste*. This group of people limit their buying choices of plastics and other toxins while at the same time increasing their recycling, repurposing, and composting of wastes until they have no garbage at all. While this is a noble effort, I am nowhere near Zero waste in my home or studio. However, it has made me aware every day of the choices that I make in how I receive and get rid of plastics in my life. It has led me to fill bottles with all sorts of tidbits of plastics and other non-recyclable detritus. These bottles are stuffed so tightly with this junk that they can be used in place of bricks or cement in building sculptures or benches, walls, and other items in a sustainable manner. It helps to limit the amount of the tiny stuff that would otherwise go into landfills or down sewer drains and subsequently into the water system. It also reduces the amount of water that is used in making cement. This is just one example of the numerous ways in which people have limited their waste in a sea of good ideas such as using cloth instead of paper towels or toilet paper, washing clothes less frequently, and so on. Eco artists can see a beautiful world ahead of us if we individually and collectively work together to buy less, recycle, reuse, and repurpose goods.

Before I found my way to Kendall College of Art and Design and Eco art I had already become an international artist. I took up painting in 2003 as I travelled with my own business. When that business ended I started painting full time. A friend who was the director of a school asked me to teach art at her school in Varanasi, India. I then used the skills that I had learned in teaching art at a community center in Bangkok, Thailand, Lund, Sweden and at an orphanage in Khon Kaen, Thailand. These led to three major solo exhibitions. Two were in India; one at the American Embassy in Delhi, and the Visual Studies Department of Banares Hindu University (BHU) in Varanasi and the third was outside of Lund, Sweden. In Copenhagen I had a one day show as the backdrop to a chamber orchestra concert in 2010. In addition I participated in two group exhibitions; one at Lane Eleven Gallery and at the Benares Club, both in Varanasi. I was also invited to three art camps; one in Jaipur, India and two in Varanasi, India where I painted alongside many Indian artists. In 2013 I organized Art Camps in Varanasi, Jaipur and Agra, India with American, Chinese and Indian artists.

At home in Holland, Michigan I began a new journey attending Kendall College of Art and Design where I received the Excellence in Painting award in 2013 and the Portfolio Prize for both graduate and undergraduate programs. At Kendall I had an exhibition with Katherine Throne called *Challenging Expectations* and I had numerous pieces on display over the years. My first large piece of work, *The Emmett Till Memorial Triptych*, was in ArtPrize in 2010 leading to interviews on WZZM TV's "Take 5" program, the Grand Rapids Press, and the Holland Sentinel.

Eager to see the international art scene in the summer of 2015, I traveled to eleven countries in four months to meet artists, make art, go to galleries and museums, and to participate in an artist residency in Italy. My art was influenced not only with the art I saw but also with the inspirations I got from mountains, cities, villages and waterways. I created abstracted and figurative colored pencil drawings, and oil pastel landscapes. At the artist residency in San Giovanni Valdarno Italy, I made plastic bag paintings on water pollution using the plastic that I collected on my travels. My four

month pilgrimage included Germany, Denmark, The Netherlands, Iceland, Belgium, France, and Italy. I went hiking in the mountains of Norway, Ireland, and Sweden, and attended international art festivals in Galway, Ireland; and Basel, Switzerland.

The most unexpected part of my trip occurred at a BnB in Ireland. The owners, Richard and Tamsin Paddy, were so excited about having a “real” artist visit that they gave me an extra room for a studio, took me on two sight seeing trips to galleries, the chocolate factory, and the sea, and introduced me to artists. Richard was an excellent pianist and it was delightful to listen to his music while I created art. At the end of my visit the Paddys held an art exhibition of my work and invited musicians to come and create music.

Wanting to share my love of travel with other artists, in 2015 I founded the nonprofit organization, Artists Cultural Exchange (ACE). ACE’s purpose is to encourage an exchange of artists between different countries, to increase art awareness, and cultural understanding among artists. The programs includes sending and receiving art “ambassadors” to learn about the arts and culture, to make long-term friendships, to work with other artists, and hold exhibitions. My immediate future travels include Liverpool, Sweden, Germany, China and Japan for artist residencies and creating more art but longterm I hope to bring artists from all over the world together in various places to create art together and exchange ideas.

Throughout my painting history almost every landscape I painted included water. In fact my first painting series focused on water. So it is not surprising that one of my first pieces that I created in the MFA program was the *Ganges River*. When I researched and became aware of the enormity of the pollution in our Great Lakes and local Lake Macatawa I realized that I needed to become an Eco artist. It led me on a journey to creating art about pollution to more environmentally friendly artwork. I was forced to examine my artistic practice, buying patterns, and waste management processes. Each of the pieces of artwork in my thesis show represents some aspect in the process of becoming an Eco artist and a move to help people, plants, and animals to survive on the earth.

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Image List

Wave Diptych

Polyethylene, acrylic, fabric
60 x 118 in.

Ganges River

Fabric, epoxy resin, polyethylene, found objects
36 x 96 x 36 in

Sky

Nylon fabric, epoxy resin
96 x 96 x 36 approximately

Braided River

Polyethylene
180 x 120 x 72 in. approximately

Blue Mist River

Gampi, Ink, Wood
72 x 34 in

Wave 3

Polyethylene and other plastics
96 x 108 in.

Paper River

Gampi, Iris, strings, ink
84 x 36

Paper River (detail)

Gampi, Iris, strings, ink
84 x 36

Algae Bloom

Acrylic and oil on Masonite
48 x 36 in.

Joi de Vivre

Oil on Masonite

48 x 36 in

Gyre

Polyethylene, fabric and acrylic on canvas

48 x 96 in.

Wave 1

Polyethylene and acrylic

60 x 48 in

Sea Foam

Oil on Masonite

48 x 36 in.

Algae 2

Oil and Sand

48 x 36 in

West Meets East-Sari

Cotton, Markers, embroidery

180 x 40 in.





























