

OBERVATIONS FROM THE VALLEY FLOOR

Mollie Berger Salah, Curator

Christine Neill's watercolors are visual explorations of the natural world. Examinations of plant and occasionally insect life are captured in intricately drawn, intimate views of the environment seen at ground level. Neill's works are not from the perspective of looking above or obliquely at her subjects. The viewer comes to the composition as if laying on the grass or forest floor. It is from the point of view of the animals and insects that inhabit these spaces that we, the human viewer, experience her work. She is particularly attuned to the biological cycle of plants and insects, opting for these subjects over other animals including people. Yet, humanity is indirectly the subject of her work, or rather the environmental impact the human species has on the planet, stating that her work "notes intersections where environmental and anthropological worlds meet."¹ Her watercolors are snapshots of a world that most people pass through every day without noticing the life force contained within. Neill captures moments in time happening adjacent to us every day, but which go ignored.

In order to amplify this aspect of our environment that most people overlook, Neill tends to work on a large scale. The largest watercolor in the exhibition is 68 inches wide but represents only a small detail of a larger landscape. If one looks closely at her work so that the composition takes over one's entire field of vision, the scene Neill has created envelopes the viewer. One feels surrounded and begins to notice the small details hidden within larger expressions of form and color. Her works demand to be viewed up close in order to experience the small moments of life documented in each composition.

¹ Christine Neill, "Artist Essay," <https://www.christineneill.com/statement>.

While Neill finds inspiration in the natural world, she does not create her final compositions outside. Her studio is where most of the artistry takes place. After collecting plant and insect specimens, Neill draws studies to explore the structure and form of her subjects. Eventually working up to the final watercolor painting, Neill will also add a laser-printed image over the initial drawing creating a multi-media work. More watercolor will fill in the remaining empty space of the paper so that a majority, if not all, of the surface is covered.

The final material element is the framing. Neill will at times choose to print a drawing on Plexiglass that is used to glaze her watercolor paintings. The Plexiglass is separated from the sheet with spacers, so the printed lines on the Plexiglass cast shadows on the paper adding, what appears to be, dark line drawings on top of the watercolor and laser-printed image. Following the lines of the shadow acts as a road map across the watercolor leading your eye to different components.

Neill's use of printing technology and her own hand is critical to the effectiveness of the final composition. The layers of human and computer-generated images mirror the overlapping presence of modern human existence and the natural world. Technology juxtaposed with naturally occurring forms recalls our history as creatures that are constantly developing and sometimes at odds with the environment around us. The paintings evoke sentiments of our modern world; human-constructed spaces that attempt to live alongside and within nature. This concept can be seen in buildings are intended to become one with the surrounding environment and plant growth around them is encouraged. Machine-made elements are layered with nature just as it appears in Neill's paintings. Computer-printed images crisscross with her own drawn forms.

These highly finished works speak to the impact humanity has on the surrounding environment.

A prime example of this theme is *White Death* (cat. #?) from 2018. What would normally be a brightly colored coral reef appears dull and pale, and the very top of the coral is starting to turn white. As rising sea temperatures kill off algae that feed the coral and microscopic zooxanthellae leave the reef, the coral starves and turns white. The dissipated zooxanthellae is depicted on the Plexiglass and therefore hovers over the drawn image, adding to the dispersing effect. The layered imagery echoes the faceted issue of climate change; the cause and effect of industrialization, a warming climate and how that impacts the environment.

In addition to demonstrating the human impact on the natural environment, Neill's works uncover the little seen symbiotic relationship between plant and insect life. *The Other Side of Paradise* (cat. #?) from 2013 illustrates the connection between plants, insects, and organic decay. The artist describes this work as uncovering the frequently ignored understory of plant-life, which is home to small creatures and decaying matter. This lower layer of vegetation is critical to the overall health of the plant. *The Other Side of Paradise* shows the life cycle of the plant invisible to the average passerby but noticed and captured by Neill.

These works provide intimate views of unseen worlds, but they should not be taken for documentary. Neill draws inspiration from the natural world and has an abundant collection of plant samples to study from in her studio, but she also takes artistic liberties when crafting her compositions. In some ways, her work can be compared to that of John James Audubon (1785-1851), a naturalist and artist who

traveled through the eastern part of the United States documenting birds of North America. Audubon collected specimens, studied them, and meticulously captured the birds' characteristics (fig. 1). In this image of the Baltimore Oriole, Audubon also inscribes the bird's Latin name for additional information. He intricately captures two males and one female bird in their natural environment with a nest. The viewer could get an immediate sense of how these birds are found in nature. His life-sized watercolor drawings were sent to London for printing because the United States did not have printing presses that could handle such large sheets of paper at that time. The prints were then hand-colored in watercolor to match his originally executed paintings. These prints were bound and published as *The Birds of America*. Audubon's use of printmaking makes him one of the earliest American artists to use this technology.²

However, while Audubon and Neill are interested in elements of the natural world and utilize printing technologies of their time to execute their final compositions, Neill approaches her practice with an increased artistic creativity than Audubon. He was an artist who carefully captured the precise character and appearance of his subjects. While Neill is attentive to how the plants and insects appear, she also enhances or alters that reality to create a beautifully executed image. This is not to the detriment of the composition, nor does it take away from the work's authenticity. Rather she approaches this practice as an artist and presents her subject-matter in an elevated manner. Producing grandiose watercolors of ignored subjects draws the viewer in so that when one is walking through the landscape one might be more aware to plant and insect-life after seeing it up close in Neill's paintings.

² Annette Blaugrund, "The Artist as Entrepreneur," in John James Audubon: The Watercolors for The Birds of America (New York: The New York Historical Society, 1993), 29-30.

These vibrantly colored intimate examinations of flora that cover nearly the entire sheet of paper stand in contrast to the slightly more abstract work *Bromil Stripes* (cat. #?) from 2011. The composition is completely derived from scans of the plants. A photograph of a living bromeliad is layered with a scan of decaying bromeliad leaves. The manipulation of these images abstracts the original form as one can only see portions of the living plant through the layer of dying leaves. The green, which is present throughout the layers, is ironically brightest in the dying leaves. However, punctuations of green can be seen in the living plant image which are broken up by white stripes. It is a dynamic image with the living leaves coming towards the viewer as the dying leaves seemingly hover above. As with Neill's other works, this composition presents the life cycle of the bromeliad, but differ materially since the artist does not contribute her own watercolor imagery to the final work.

Some of the earliest works in the exhibition, *Balance of Colors* and *Balance of Essence* (cat. #?) from 2007, also skirt the line between naturalism and abstraction. Executed entirely in watercolor, these compositions are clearly of stones which are impossibly balanced one atop the other. It seems as though the tower of stones could topple at any moment and yet they are so purposefully placed that it is as though they have been in this position forever. For Neill, these images of stone towers recall cairns and markers, which are intentional objects that Neill has reinterpreted as something to behold. Balance is seen not only in how the stones are placed on the paper, but also in her color choices. *Balance of Colors* alternates between dark and light stones, while *Balance of Essence* appears as a gradation from light to dark.

However, it is Neill's use of negative space in these images that makes them striking. The contrast between the light background and the darker stones especially in the areas in between two balancing stones provides a true journey for the viewer's eye. One zigs-zags up and down the tower following the edge of the stone until your eye reaches the point at which two stones touch. For a moment one sees a point of connection, of dark meeting dark, and then the eye continues on its path. The stone compositions are studies of echoing forms and angles, of textures and colors.

Neill achieves a breadth of imagery from her explorations and study of plants. It has been a constant fascination for her which she has captured through mixed-media paintings in watercolor and digital printing. She has been able to combine her two main interests: biology and art. Climate change and the earth's response to environmental threats inform her practice. Far from being purely documentary, Neill closely studies her subjects both outdoors and in her studio. She captures the spirit of her subjects and elevates it to a scale that is completely absorbing. Her work crosses between painting and printed image, reality and fantastical, but what remains constant are the relationship demonstrated between humans, the environment and natural lifecycles. John Muir wrote "Most people are *on* the world, not in it..."³ Neill's works puts us firmly in the world.

³ John Muir, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1938), 320.



Figures

Figure 1. Robert Havell after John James Audubon, *Baltimore Oriole*, 1827, hand-colored engraving and aquatint, National Gallery of Art, 1945.8.12