

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF A REGENERATIVE SYSTEM OF CREATIVE  
MAKING

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partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art in the School of Art  
and Design.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF A REGENERATIVE SYSTEM OF CREATIVE MAKING

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Having grown up on a farm in rural North Carolina in my youth and remaining an avid gardener through the all stages of my life -I have developed a deep appreciation and awareness of the environment and its natural systems. As the conversation surrounding climate change looms and its impact becoming increasingly apparent, I began reflecting on my studio practice with a critical lens, looking for a way to respond and reframe my creative process in this paradigm. I proposed to myself two questions: What could a regenerative system of creative making look like? How can my studio practice function regeneratively with the environment? The key term in these questions is Regenerative. It is an idea I frequently came across in books regarding agricultural reform and practices which were not only meant to work symbiotically with the environment but to further remediate materials and resources. I decided to adopt this terminology into my studio practice, striving to find a new way for myself to create which was sustainable in its ability to source material and remediate waste as responsibly as possible. This thesis describes my proposed system making, a system that will take many more years of work to fully implement, and further describes how this research and shift of intentionality is reflected in my current artwork. My goal is not to lay out *the* way to make creatively in a time of climate change, but to offer an example of what such a system may look like. My hope is that this may

be of some inspiration for others to reframe their daily tasks or process of making to one that helps mitigate the challenges we, and our future generations will face.

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## INTRODUCTION

I am interested in developing a sustainable creative practice due to my growing concerns and awareness of climate change. As a painter, I have made work in the past with both traditional and contemporary materials, many of which were toxic and unsustainable. The imagery in my current work depicts botanical entities and atmospheric studies of pigment and paper. They are inspired by my mind's wanderings while researching ecological systems, botany, mesofauna, and regenerative agriculture. I strive to progress my creative intentions and methodology with this work by operating where creative making and natural cycles symbiotically intersect.

I acknowledge that the changes needed to mitigate the effects of climate change on a macro level are largely dependent on the implementation of global policy. On a micro level, I want to reframe the intentionality in which I live, function, and create to contribute towards a cultural movement that sows the seeds for others to shift their modes of making to be more aligned with natural systems and environmental justice.

My idea of regenerative art oscillates between the ideals of formalism and natural symbiosis, and the pragmatism of conceptually reframing our methods and modes of manufacture as a response to climate and environmental concerns. This reference of the oscillation between two binaries finds influence from the writings of Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van in the online blog *Notes on Meta-Modernism*, 2010. While I do not conceive my work to ascribe strictly to this theory, I do associate some of the terminology, imagery, and processes when describing regenerative art or regenerative making as relational.

I will begin by briefly describing this theoretical process of a regenerative system for creative making. I will then describe my current work and how this theory of making informs the practice, content, process, and decisions undertaken in my current studio work. I recognize that

to implement this system as my studio practice is a long-term process that will take many years to be fully realized. At the same time, this theory operates as a map and compass with which my creative making process follows. In addition, when researching the steps in this system of making I have learned to not underestimate its complexity. Whether germinating and propagating plants, making handmade paint and paper, or simply making a pile of compost that reaches thermophilic temperature, each step takes extensive work and research to perfect. Despite all challenges, I feel refining such a system is important to my values as an artist and environmentalist.

### **Context**

While my current studio practice and work is revolving around the idea of developing a regenerative method of creative making, or what I refer to as regenerative art, much of the inspiration leading to this came from artists functioning far from this methodology. I have in the past experienced sculptural works by Anish Kapoor, and in retrospect, feel my exposure to his art marked the reassessment of my own intentions in studio work. His sculptures were visually magnificent and dealt with space and object, but not the environment. As I inquired more into his work, I saw that the manufacture of such objects as a colossal manifestations of material resources. I have developed the perspective that material correlates directly with nature. The natural toll of his art led me to take a more critical lens regarding my own object/image making. Both living and making creates waste and requires resources. I do not think that means that either of these should be stopped, but I feel responding with regenerative making creates dialog, and offers a practical starting point to reframing the creative strategies we exercise in art making. I reference Kapoor not because I feel my work is closely tied to his, but because my personal interactions with his art sparked a departure of intentions within my own work.

My exploration into regenerative art has also been influenced by other artists who focus conceptually on the environment and ecology. Mel Chin's *Revival Field* explored remediation of land polluted by industrial waste in the 1990's. In this process he "sculpted" a new ecosystem by planting cultivars that accumulated nutrients and toxins that remediated the soil. This is a great example of art that remediates, in that it transforms what is unusable to usable. It is also important to note that *Revival field* is an enclosure which actually excludes the native ecology. When I think about the term regenerative art, I feel it is important that its making or production works symbiotically with the native ecological system and it supports a sustainable continuation of making. I see this as the core difference between the regenerative art I am exploring and the myriad of post-modern conceptual artists' and land artists' work.

## CHAPTER ONE: THEORY OF A REGENERATIVE SYSTEM FOR CREATIVE MAKING

My theory proposes the following two questions: What can a regenerative system of making and regenerative art look like? How can a studio practice function regeneratively with the environment? The following section of my thesis attempts to answer these questions and proposes a process for regenerative creative practices.

### **Compost for Cultivation**

In many self-contained cycles and systems there lacks a specific beginning and ending; they are simply continuous. A common reference in many sources concerning cultivation and soil life is the “Law of Return.” While many descriptions fall into the category of anecdotal gardener’s advice, I would describe this “Law,” as far as the purpose of my proposed system of regenerative making is concerned, as the need to return nutrients back to the original source they are taken in the same or greater amounts. This is necessary to maintain nutrient balanced soil, and thus, a healthy ecosystem. With this in mind, I think a good entry point when explaining a system of regenerative making is with the trees and the soil found beneath their canopies.

I propose that a regenerative creative practice could start by gathering leaves in a wood lot or yard. Tree leaves are a key source in supplying biomass with necessary minerals to grow fiber and food when used in a compost bin or shredded for mulch. Trees have long roots that act as miners, pulling up minerals and nutrients from the depth of the earth. Using trees in this way rids the necessity of committing fossil fuels to the procurement of soil amendments from mining operations. This, along with nitrogen fixing legumes, and clover as green manure, in my experience, has proven adequate in cultivation of plant life.

I theorize this to be an important step in any regenerative creative practice that uses materials derived from plant-based sources, such as fiber or botanical colorants. Not all regenerative studio practices have to start here, but for my interest in making watercolors on paper, it makes sense.

### **Paper Making**

During my graduate studies, I was introduced to the process of paper making. The experience and information I learned from paper making has proved to be pivotal in the development of my understanding of how creative making can become symbiotic and sustainable through natural cycles and systems.

Paper using natural fibers is an important key in supplying a support for image making and cycling biomass in this regenerative system of making. I think watercolor paper made from cotton rag or other natural fibers which is produced outside of this system is acceptable to use. It is manufacturing processes that by produce toxic waste or the perpetual importation of heavy materials over long distances I see the aspects to be minimized. My goal however is a regenerative system of making which takes and returns biomass symbiotically with the environment, not a romanticized vision of back to the earth purity. Therefore, remediating materials manufactured elsewhere is equally as important as recycling the materials taken directly from nature. This also has long term benefits. Introducing additional materials sourced outside of the self-contained system allows you to replace any biomass removed from the cycling in the form of finished work.

My interest in paper comes from its utilization of plant fibers. Plants are nature's primary producers and I see the opportunity of a direct and sustainable source of substrate for image making as a significant step in cycling biomass in a regenerative creative system. The clear

tradeoff is the time commitment required for hand-made paper and initial cost of equipment. I believe that as I gain experience in the process of cultivating and processing natural fibers, an efficient system will develop allowing this to be the primary source of biomass used as the support on which to make images. Until this mastery and refinement, I am convinced that a tandem use of bought and made paper are quite practical and still align with the intentions of this theory of making.

### **Paint Making**

Another aspect of a system of sustainable making revolves around the procurement of colorants to make imagery in watercolor on paper. For the past 16 years of my studio practice, paint making has been a corner stone of my creative process. Focused on traditional oil painting methods, many of my intentions and decisions were revolved around the question of stability and longevity of work. Remediation of materials back into the environment, for many of those years, was never even considered. As my priorities shifted, my choice in, and method of, procuring pigments has fallen under my own critical lens. Colorants natively foraged in the form of ochre and pulverized stone are obviously ideal in the regenerative system of making that I am describing. The goal is to minimize/eliminate the need to import colorants sourced from extractive mining operations or toxic chemical processes. Luckily, I have had reasonable success finding veins of ochre in western North Carolina. Mostly reddish and ruddy orange ochres abound, but clean yellow ochre veins have been more elusive, and most have been brownish from a considerable amount of contaminant. Violet browns in the form of hematite have been found while hiking surprisingly readily. While relying on locally foraged pigments sounds ideal, the reality is that such minerals are distributed through geography quite unevenly. While I will continue to explore and refine this avenue of procuring colorants in this way, I am also reminded

that a goal of a regenerative system of making is the remediation of materials back into the environment. Therefore, purchasing small amounts of nontoxic pigments that maybe re-introduced into the environment are viable in this proposed system. It is however important to note that even nontoxic colorants, including those natively foraged, can be problematic in a system revolved around the cultivation of plants. High concentrations of nontoxic elements can be excessive if introduced to cultivated crops or local flora and result in nutrient toxicity.

### **Image Making**

I think a lot about the relationships we cannot see when I paint; particularly the ones that are difficult to define and have interconnectivity with larger systems and forces. The primary way I explore and process information is by creating visual imagery through mark making. I learn about subjects through experience, observation, or research; and utilize the acts of drawing and painting to establish a meditative state where my mind is able to absorb and develop ideas and understanding. In this, I do not mean meditation as in a clearing of my mind, but as in a focused and resonate oscillation between openness and retention. This process allows me to place new information and ideas in an interconnective web in my mind. This mental oscillation is expressed through my physical movements and is a dance between my mind, body, and spirit. This is the vocabulary of my mark making; it is a visual documentation of information and thought being processed.

My current works are watercolor on paper and are exploring different aspects of ecology, environment and cultivation. In this work, I am particularly interested in the way plant's function, their morphology, and the dynamics of their symbiotic relationships, specifically with the mesofauna and the cycling minerals in the environment. I am exploring these relationships

because I am interested in better understanding their dynamics and how they may be models for systems of regenerative making.

In my work, the process and intentions are integral with both the content and concept. I see the art of my work as the entirety of the creative process and how it weaves and interconnects with nature. Painting and image making act as the delivery system to the viewer because it is in these moments of the process where I am able to document and offer an entry point into my dialog concerning nature, relationships, and systems.

### **Compost for Remediation**

As imagery is explored, waste in the studio is inevitably produced. Whether it be scraps of paper cut away in a collage type process or through the discard of sketches and unwanted work, the most important part of a regenerative creative process of making, and the remediation of materials is as follows: composting. While there are some caveats when composting paintings, the general idea is almost painfully simple, especially to those already familiar with the process. As waste is disposed into the compost bin, the plant fibers contained in the paper act as a primary carbon source necessary in the composting process. At a ratio of 30 parts carbon and 1 part nitrogen, which is required for proper composting, nitrogen can be supplied from any green sources from the local environment, garden, or kitchen. As I anticipate an excess of minerals that frequent my palette, largely Iron (ochre and iron oxide pigments), sulfur and sodium (ultramarines), along with an imbalance of PH, I propose returning to the wood lot we began, instead of a small garden area used for cultivating crops. It is important to disperse this compost over a large area to mitigate any excess concentration of elements. Feeding the trees from which leaves were originally harvested adheres to the law of return, thus allowing for a sustainable and balanced ecological state.

## CHAPTER TWO: DESCRIPTIONS OF CURRENT PAINTINGS

### **The Piss Radish Harvest**

I begin by sharing the oil painting “The Piss Radish Harvest.” It is, in relation to the rest of my art shown for my thesis, an anomaly. To begin, the materials used do not adhere to the system of regenerative making I have theorized; it does however offer an example of my studio practice prior to this undertaking. Further, it is included because much of the ideas and concerns in this thesis began with this painting.

The imagery revolves around my interpretation of societies relationship with nature and the environment. We are an agro-society, our survival is reliant on nature and the natural cycles, yet we fail to respect their health and functionality. The ghostly figure in the bottom right yields a meager harvest, while the landscape in the background describes an ecology in a troubled state. The most precious resource to survival, water, is being tainted with waste. The figure urinating is a gesture of ill sentiment, and the glistening arc of piss is reminiscent of the arcing rainbows found in J.M.W. Turner’s romantic landscapes of the mid 1800’s. Radishes hover through the composition, a root vegetable that I associate with being an environmental indicator. The humble radish often reveals in its taste the health of the soil it was grown in and the temperature extremes it endured. The silhouetted figure on the right holds a scythe looking outward toward a landscape where in the distance two plumbs of smoke rise.

### **Strange Specimens**

This shadow box was constructed to house watercolor specimens of store-bought paint on paper; 237 pigments were sampled. From that range, a hand full were separated for further study determined by which ones I found the most visually pleasing. This is the selection included in

*Strange Specimens*. They are displayed as one may find insects in a naturalist's study. Specimen pins are used to tack down the samples and indicate that a similar interest and relationship was had with these bits of paper and pigment. The colors are arranged as if they were butterflies or a similar species of interest. My study undertaken with this work focused on colors with granulating effects. I was drawn to the intimate reaction these pigments had to the texture of the paper. From this I furthered narrowed my pigment studies to which paint I felt I could reproduce either through foraged sources or with non-toxic dry pigment. In creating *Strange Specimens*, a basic understanding of the pigments that would be included in my envisioned sustainable system of making emerged.

### **Let's Talk Legumes**

The imagery of legumes is an important reminder of the nitrogen cycle in nature and its necessity in agriculture and local food systems. The humble pea is able to help sequester this element from the air, convert, and then store it in the soil. It is able to do this because of its symbiotic relationship with bacteria in its rhizosphere. Bacterial colonies appear as nodules on the root system of legumes, and it is at these sites where nitrogen is stored. This remarkable ability allows the strategic use of this plant to replace the need to import a nitrogen source which requires added carbon to the atmosphere. The highly evolved skillsets of all plants, not just legumes are celebrated with this piece.

### **Propagating Entities**

This collage of watercolor on paper is my visual exploration into the plant propagation and lifecycle. The scale of the work (16'x15') allows me to elevate the imagery of botanical entities above the viewers. My intention is to impress a formidable relationship with the plant as an entity. Each entity depicts a different method of plant propagation, layering, pollination and

division. Exposed root systems dangle to invite the questioning of their purpose. I am interested in the relationships we do not see, for example, a plant's rhizosphere is a rich sanctuary for my imagination. The formal play with the materials in the work studies how individual pigments react on paper. Utilizing foraged and non-toxic pigments (that I researched in previous works, such as in *Strange Specimens*), I assessed them as a sample palette that could be used in a regenerative studio practice. The orange ochre used was found near my home garden, while the blues utilize a Milori Prussian combined with a small amount of black iron oxide. Even though Prussian blue is a synthetic pigment whose chemical analysis greatly varies, I chose to use it in this work because I am fascinated with its medical use to remediate radioactive cesium and thallium in human intestines. As I paint, I think of the plant's rhizosphere as its digestive tract, healing the mesofauna found within, heals the environment, and in turn heals our own health. Symbiotic and regenerative relationships are the core of this imagery. *Propagating Entities* reminds me of our genetic similarities with the plant kingdom, as well as our own, humbly shorter, genetic sequence.

## IMAGERY

**Figure 1**

*The Piss Radish Harvest*



Perry Houlditch, 2019, oil on canvas, 84" x 92" located in the artist's collection

**Figure 2**

*Strange Specimens*



Perry Houlditch 2020, Collage watercolor collage on paper mounted on wall, 24"x 36"

located in artist collection

**Figure 3**

*Lets Talk Legumes*



Perry Houlditch 2021, Painting Watercolor on paper, 42"x45" located in artists collection

**Figure 4**

*Propagating Entities*



Perry Houlditch, 2021, Watercolor Collage on Paper, 16' x 17' located in the artist's Collection

## CONCLUSION

This is a description of my theory for a system of creative making that can be utilized in a regenerative studio practice. While it will take much more work for me to fully adopt each of these steps into my creative process, it is what I am working towards. As I reflect on the work I have produced through researching this process, I continue to see more parallels with natural systems and my studio practice. The collage aspects adopted in my work *Propagation Entities* began covering my studio floor with paper clippings and scrap that resemble the detritus found on a forest floor. Sweeping and collecting this into bags to be composted feels interchangeable with the act of raking and composting leaves in the autumn.

Furthermore, paintings and drawings which failed to come to full fruition (watercolor is an unforgiving medium after all!) do not feel like losses, but like reagents necessary for creating next season's work. As opposed to the paintings I have done in the past, which utilized toxic and difficult to dispose of materials, my art partners with the natural cycle of decomposition and growth. Seeing material waste not as a burden, but as transitional to more work, allows me to avoid any sense of preciousness in the studio. It encourages creative risk taking, something that is often tempered by over valuing of materials due to scarcity through un-sustainability. This proves that my theory of regenerative art and making is not only possible but has significant and positive impacts on the artists' and viewers' ability to think and make both creatively and sustainably. Further, it offers anyone willing to reframe their studio practice to align symbiotically with the natural systems and the environment, a process of art making that oscillates between the binaries of beginning and end, formal and conceptual, and residuum and completeness.

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Artistic Work Copyrighted to Tate:

JMW Turner, 1798. *Buttermere Lake, with Part of Cromackwater, Cumberland, a Shower*

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-buttermere-lake-with-part-of-cromackwater-cumberland-a-shower>