In the Old Way

Studying the Modern Mississippi River Through the Practice of Traditional Hand-Skills

Fan-Kai Lin - Barbara King Proposal - 2019

“Paint what you feel.
Paint what you see.
Paint what is real to you.”

Robert Henri
Overview

What is the last beautiful nature scene that you saw? Try to picture the view you saw in your brain. Can you use the pen to draw down as many details as you can?

There are many people that like to go into nature to enjoy an environment around them, but there are more people that like to go into nature and spend times to get the nice shot of them with beautiful background and post on the social media. Before the camera was invented, the only way that the old master artists recorded the view was by sketching. Their sketches and their imagination were the resources when they painted. Thanks to the Savanna Studio, every landscape architecture student from Iowa State University has the ability to sketch and record what they see by hand. However, in one of the Community Visioning meetings, a few fifth-year landscape architecture students were asked, what is your time ratio spent on the design project by hand and computer. Except me, they all answered more than 90% of the time to work on the projects on the computer. My peers made me question whether the computer and phone replace the hand's sketches and drawing skills during the design process.

Twenty years ago, people rendered the projects and recorded the site by hands. On the other hands, people nowadays do most of the works on the computer and using their phones to record the site. However, the convenience by phone and computer also make people lose their skill; the skill to observe nature and learn from it and also the skill to memorizes the scene they saw in their brain.

I remember from Professor Heidi Hohmann’s history class, she mentioned about the Hudson River School which played the important roles on the American art movement and influenced the landscape architecture back in the mid-19th century because their sublime and picturesque ideas. When I visited the Seattle Art Museum; they have numbers of paintings from the Hudson River School. When I saw the original, I was impressed in the ways of all the details and the overall composition. I want to know how did these artists create these amazing work without the help of technology. It make me want to make a series of paintings along Mississippi River to explore the old master’s approaches. Additionally, these paintings will show the modern day Mississippi River which is after industrialization and well developed landscape to contrast the old Hudson River School paintings’ landscape.

Therefore, with support from the Barbara King Scholarship, I wish to learn from the Hudson River School’s approach to explore the landscape around the Mississippi River in the modern day. I am using the old approach to paint the present-day landscape to contrast the landscape’s history and it can also help me gain a better understanding of the value of hand drawing skill.
A brief history about Hudson River School and Mississippi River

Hudson River School

Hudson River School was the first native school of painting in the United States between 1825-1870. It started from a group of landscape painters who began working on paintings in the Hudson River Valley. This group of painters was largely influenced by European Romanticism; they capture the beauty of sublime and picturesque nature.

Thomas Cole, as one of the most important artists in the first-generation Hudson River School, had many students and brought symbolism into nature paintings. He makes landscape paintings, not just a realistic painting, but also transform the natural scenes into meaningful allegories. The second generation of Hudson River School painters left the East and explored the other parts of the country. John Banvard and Henry Lewis at this time painted many panoramas of the Mississippi River.

Mississippi River

Two thousand three hundred twenty miles, the second largest drainage system in North America, the Mississippi River passes through ten different states, and it is also the origin of many cities, like Minneapolis, St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans. The Mississippi River not only provides diverse outdoor recreations but also is the home to many populations of living things, birds, fish, mammal species and reptiles. Mark Twain, the American Writer, told Chicago Tribune “Along the Upper Mississippi every hour brings something new. There are crowds of odd islands, bluffs, prairies, hills, woods, and villages- everything one could desire amuse the children. Few people ever think of going there, however . . . We ignore the finest part of the Mississippi.”
Method

One of the most important beginning Hudson River School painters, Thomas Doughty said “Don’t look at the artist’s paintings, don’t look at the manual. Go out into nature and study directly from nature. You need to go out to understand the process of nature”. The very important element of this project is observing nature and recording by sketching. The sketch is important because there was no camera at the time, so they cannot use photos as reference. Careful observation, understating of nature and the sketches documents become extremely important for the artists. They use *en plein air* sketches and the imagination as a reference to start the composition. I will follow this approach. Therefore, I would not take any photo during the observation trip, but instead, I will do as many rough detail sketches from trees, rocks, to even industrial bridges as possible.

Instead of using oil paint like most of Hudson River School’s works, I will use watercolor instead, because I am more familiar the watercolor which can help me focus more on the idea behind the Hudson River School, as their process, approach, and content. I believe only use sketches as a reference is not easy to do a realistic painting, but I think it will also become the good opportunity to practice looking at the details of nature and designing the composition.

Plan

The plan has three parts: 1: Exploration 2: Research 3: Creation

1: Exploration

I started my landscape architecture study from the Savanna Studio Trip in sophomore year. Therefore, I want to follow up the old routes, to sketch and record along the Mississippi River to prepare the material to work on the final paintings. It depends on the budgets; I will do a seven day or ten day trip. The Mississippi River can be divided into three sections: Upper Mississippi River, Middle Mississippi River and Lower Mississippi River. My goal is to do one painting on each section, so I will divide seven or ten days into three parts of the Mississippi River. It doesn’t need to go from beginning to the end of the Mississippi river, but I will research the important spots along these three areas to plan the detailed observation trip.
2: Research
The first generation of Hudson River School’s works were started along the Hudson River on East Coast and a lot of the collection nowadays is collected in the Museum in New York. I will go to the New-York Historical Society, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Brooklyn Museum which collect many Hudson River School’s works and sketch each piece and study light and composition. The take away from this trip is to learn from the old masterpieces and learn more about the history and the story behind them.

3: Creation
I will continue to analyze Hudson River School’s work in the way of composition, content, color, light, and details. Second, I will study the old Romanticism British Watercolor, because they are the first group of artists to develop a landscape painting through watercolor. They also focus on working on detailed landscape painting, so I believe they will be a good model to study a detailed watercolor painting. Then, I will use these two studies to begin the final pieces. As I mentioned previously, the only reference to work on the final pieces will be my sketches from the trip.

Timeline

May       June       July       August       September

- 10 (7)Days Mississippi River Exploration Trip
- 5 (3)Days New York Museums Research Trip
- 2-3 Months Creation: Documenting & Painting
- Send the Digital Booklet to ISU Landscape Architecture Department (If is possible, arrange an exhibition at College of Design during the Fall 2019 semester)
**Outcome**

I am excited to start this series of paintings and experiment with the old painting process which only uses sketches and the imagination as a reference to create a realistic painting. I will be expanding my knowledge of understanding nature and letting the painting tell its story.

If I have the opportunity, I would love to exhibit my works at Iowa State University in either College of Design or Memorial Union. I will be exhibiting three 30”x21” watercolor paintings, (36”x27” with frame) with a series of original sketches (30+) from my time spent at the Mississippi River. Additionally, I will make a digital booklet including two sections of information. Firstly, showing my steps of creating the three paintings with notes and several *en plein air* sketches. From the booklet there will be the QR code connecting to the video link which shows the time-lapse video of the process. This resource can provide potentially for the future Savanna Studio’s tutorial on the outdoor sketch and watercolor. I will also make graphics to explain tips about watercolor and sketches and my exploration to compare the computer skill and hand-draw skill. The second part of the booklet will be Hudson River School research which will include the sketches of my analysis and study process on the previous master paintings.

Additionally, I would love to donate one piece of my watercolor work produced during this project as a permanent gift to Iowa State University Landscape Architecture Department.

**Qualification**

I believe that I am qualified to work on this project, because of my deep understanding of both hand and digital rendering skill. I have been exploring digital tools for landscape architecture works since spring semester sophomore year. On the other hand, I have developed my hand drawing skill from my art interest and learned a lot of things from Drawing II & III classes at Iowa State University. Below is my artist statement, experience and some works samples to provide better understanding about my works.

**Artist statement**

As a landscape architecture student, I look at landscape in a different way. Nature is my inspiration, but instead of recording the view by a camera, I like to record and interpret the existing view into my imagination of the world. This does not only define the space but also transforms my thought of the landscape into the color and the brush strokes. I see the interaction between plantings and place, and how to create the space in works as well as form the picturesque scene.
I am working in both watercolor and soft pastel. I like the uncertainty of water when I do watercolor, and I apply a similar idea into pastels and do a wet underpainting during my painting process. Washes create surprising beauty on the first layer, and soft pastels add to that on additional layers. I explore my feelings in this abstract underpainting and pigment running in the water and use that as a base to define the space and color. Outside circumstances and environment affect my mood and thought about the space. I want my works to create an atmosphere based on water’s movement and what I feel from it.

**Exhibitions**

2018
- NW View from the Saint Andrew Pier, I Painted the Yellow Flowers Pink & Spring Lake Laverne, Regional Juried Greater Des Moines Exhibited XXV, Heritage Art Gallery, Des Moines, U.S.A.
- Van Horne Trail in the Morning, Juried Studies in Creativity Exhibit, Memorial Union, Ames, IA, U.S.A.
- Lake LaVerne, National Juried 50th Clay, Fiber, Paper, Glass, Metal, Wood, Octagon Center for the Arts, IA, U.S.A.
- Four Seasons- Lake LaVerne, Memorial Union, Ames, IA, U.S.A.
- Solo Exhibition ,Invitational, Genus Landscape Architects Studio, Des Moines, IA, U.S.A.

2017
- Death and Life, Juried Studies in Creativity Exhibit, Memorial Union, Ames, IA, U.S.A.
- Lasting? Moment?, Juried Apex Exhibit, Memorial Union, Ames, IA, U.S.A.

**Award/Grand/Art Residency**

- 2018 Kingsbrae International Residence for the Art, Saint Andrew, New Brunswick, Canada
- Honorable Mention for 2018 Studies in Creativity Student Exhibit
- 2017 Focus Artist Grant
Badland 02, 29” x 18”, watercolor

SE view from the Pier, 20 3/4"x 7 1/8", watercolor

Lotus Forest, 14 1/8"x 10 1/8", watercolor

Secret Path by the Van Horne Trail, 15"x 10", watercolor
# Budget

## Exploration: Mississippi River Road Trip 10 (7) Days

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<th>cost</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Car Renting for 10 days with insurance</td>
<td>$ 500 (350)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food (avg. $30/day)</td>
<td>$ 300 (210)</td>
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<td>Living (avg. $ 40/day)</td>
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<td>Gas</td>
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## Research: New York Museums Trip 5 (3) Days

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<td>Food (avg. $30/day)</td>
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<td>Living (avg. $50/day)</td>
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<td>Ground Travel by Bus &amp; Subway</td>
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<td>The Metropolitan Museum of Art Admission</td>
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<td>New-York Historical Society Admission</td>
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<td>Brooklyn Museum Admission</td>
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## Creation: Documenting & Painting

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<tr>
<td>Art Supplies</td>
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<td>Three Frames 36” x 27”</td>
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<td>GoPro Hero 7 Black (Silver)</td>
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<td>Book: Turner in His Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book: Thomas Cole’s Journey: Atlantic Crossings</td>
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*Art Supplies Include: Holbein and Winsor & Newton Watercolor, 10 Arches Rough Watercolor Papers 156 lb, Sketch Papers, (few brushes) and charcoal

*Frames Include: Wood(Metal) Frames, (UV) Picture Framing Acrylic, Self Adhesive Mounting Board, 8 Ply Mat Board

## Total

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<th>cost</th>
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<td>Minimum Budget TOTAL</td>
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Reference


“Hudson River school - American art movement”, *The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica*,


“The Hudson River School”, *The Art Story- Modern Art insight*,


“Mississippi River: A Cultural Treasure”, *American Rivers*,