

HUMAN, YOU ARE HUMAN

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CHANGING PERSPECTIVE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE LANDSCAPE

A collaboration between British painter David Hockney and filmmaker Philip Haas in 1998, *A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China*, takes the form of an hour-long documentary film in which Hockney takes the viewer on a guided tour of a late-seventeenth-century Chinese scroll. The 72-foot-long scroll, entitled *The Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour* (Figure 1),¹ was painted by Wang Hui and his assistants between 1691 and 1698. The scroll illustrates the journey of the Chinese Emperor on the Grand Canal in a panoramic view of Chinese life, depicting everything from elaborate government ceremonies to everyday matters like shopping and laundry.²

Hockney compares the Chinese scroll painting to an Italian painting by Canaletto (1697-1768) – *Capriccio: Plaza San Marco Looking South and West* (1763) – which uses Western perspective techniques to portray a comparable busy scene in a European style. These contrasts lead into wide-ranging observations on art history, aesthetics and spirituality, with Hockney emphasising the development of different notions of perspective.³

Hockney describes the Chinese painting's use of composition and angle, including cutting corners, the treatment of houses and roads, to the shifting of our viewing perspective as we look at it. He describes this shifting perspective in the Chinese painting as a moving image that enables viewers to change their viewpoint.⁴ This technique draws the viewer 'inside' the painting through spatial complexity and multiple viewpoints. Hockney believes that keeping the



Figure 1. 清 王翬 等 康熙南巡圖（卷三：濟南至泰山） 卷三
Wang Hui, *The Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll Three: Ji'nan to Mount Tai*, 1698, ink and colour on silk, 67.9 x 1393.8 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
See <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/49156>.

audience 'inside' the painting allows viewers to navigate and focus their viewing *in* the painting, instead of looking *at* the painting. By contrast, in conventional Western landscape painting, the viewer is positioned 'outside' the painting to enable them look at things in the painting, scanning from one side to the other. This kind of composition fails to achieve the same effect as Chinese painting to draw viewers into the work as if they were within the scroll itself. In this sense, the viewer is not involved in the scene, but is detached.

Another Western artwork, *Memories (Lawn Tennis)*, painted by Belgian artist Fernand Khnopff in 1889 (Figure 2), demonstrates a shift in perspective by reflecting the conflicting emotional states of the figures depicted in the scene. The painting shows seven women standing on a lawn, some holding tennis racquets. While ostensibly participants in a group setting, preparing to play or having played tennis, the women appear separate, motionless and lost in thought, despite occupying the same space.⁵ This painting triggers my interest because it reflects the disconnection between humans and the natural environment in the twenty-first century. In the context of the Symbolist movement, Khnopff's work suggests that 'reality' should act as a conduit for an idea, rather than the visually realistic depiction evident in Realism.⁶



Figure 2. Fernand Khnopff, *Memories (Lawn Tennis)*, 1889, pastel on paper; 127 x 200 cm.

See <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/khnopff/drawings/27.html>.

These various reflections are something I wish to invoke in my own work – not just my own personal beliefs, but a broader, chaotic mental state and the associated physical behaviour that marks the Anthropocene – the proposed geological age where human activities have significantly impacted on earth's ecosystems and climate.⁷ My paintings attempt to describe the invisible and disjointed social environment of anthropogenic landscapes. The urbanised figure and the rectangular object in my work *In my mind, I can fly* (Figure 3) can be seen as separate from, or part of, the scene, reflecting two extremes – the arrogance and the carelessness that characterise the Anthropocene. I see the Anthropocene as an energising thought experiment about humanity's propensity for overconsumption. In my work, figures exist as physical objects, displaying conflicted positions and gestures to imply posthuman disconnection with nature. The meaning of these figures emerges from the landscape, with or without feelings connected with nature; they illustrate the theory behind Timothy Morton's term "hyperobjects."

Timothy Morton, a professor at Rice University, explores ecological studies through a new philosophical movement: object-oriented ontology or the study of hyperobjects.⁸ In hyperobject theory, human beings are not placed above other kinds of living beings and this determines how we interact with the things that exist in the Anthropocene. For Morton, phenomena like global warming are not a purely scientific issue or an ideological or solution-oriented concept, but are to be thought of in terms of the human relationship with nature and built environments.⁹ Hyperobjects are things with more than one purpose which are massively distributed in time and space relative to human space.¹⁰ For example, recycled rubbish could be seen as a hyperobject, with its extensive connections between countries, businesses and individuals. Humans produce plastic bags that cause pollution, that in turn leads to the extinction of animal species.

The hyperobject has overwhelmed our individual thoughts, emotions and behaviour in many ways. According to Morton, global warming is a problem we understand perfectly, but to which no real solution has yet emerged.¹¹ Global warming has prompted a flood of irrational reactions and incomprehensible logic as we seek a solution. For example, some people are blinding themselves to the issue with mindless consumption, while others pride themselves on their environmental consciousness. Another group feels that it is simply too hard to grapple with the ecological issues at stake and choose to avoid them. Morton describes these types of reaction as “hypocrisies.”¹² There is an imbalance in our feelings between a sense of urgency, motivation and fear when we are confronted with a hyperobject like global warming. Thus, in addition to facing a real environmental crisis, we are facing an emotional one, as individuals seek comfort and deal with their own emotions on a daily basis.

Our feelings are as real as the physical phenomena, and our responses are often based on emotions. We feel distress, nostalgia and fear arising from our disconnection from the present state of our individual territory or space. Glenn Albrecht, former professor of sustainability at Murdoch University, has coined the term “solastalgia,” meaning a “form of psychic or existential distress caused by environmental change.”¹³ The way we react to information about climate change, in both positive and negative ways, is a reflection of our inner psychological world as we experience distress over our threatened environment. However, few of us understand the implications of our emotional reactions to anthropogenic information.¹⁴

The reality of the Anthropocene is contradictory – even the term itself is debated by scientists. In 2000, Paul Crutzen, an atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate, argued that we have entered a new division of geological time, the Anthropocene, where significant human impact on the earth has dramatically changed levels of biodiversity on the surface of the planet.¹⁵ However, many stratigraphers criticise the term “Anthropocene,” arguing that it is not a formal unit within the Geological Time Scale based on current stratigraphical evidence.¹⁶

The United Nations estimates that the world population will reach 9.7 billion by 2050.¹⁷ Population growth is often grouped in the “human action” category of environmental problems.¹⁸ Murray Bookchin has argued that the environmentalism and ecologism of the 1970s were tainted by racist attitudes to survival in an anthropogenic landscape.¹⁹ Although it is a superficial argument to blame over-population for the environmental crisis, this emphasis persists today. According to Dr Jane Goodall, speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January 2020, “All these [environmental] things we talk about wouldn’t be a problem if there was the size of population that there was 500 years ago.”²⁰

While this assertion from a remarkable environmentalist sounds unexceptionable, it has underlying elements that mislead. The political ecologist Heather Alberro has pointed out that inequalities in power, wealth and resources are driving the environmental crisis. She notes that wealthy countries like the UK and the US have contributed significant historic emissions since the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century. According to 2018 statistics, China and North America account for almost half of the emissions of the planet.²¹ In 2015, British charity Oxfam released a study that found that the richest 10% of the world’s population are responsible for 50% of fossil fuel emissions, while the poorest half of the world – 3.5 billion people – produce only 10% of emissions.²² Thus, imbalanced economic growth has resulted in an imbalance of resource distribution: while the poor have been exploited for their environmental resources, they cannot resolve the ecological and economic problems that have resulted on their own. Alberro stresses that issues of ecology and social justice cannot be separated from one another.²³

We only encourage our self-destructive tendencies by championing a reduction in the human population to solve environment problems. According to Eve Andrews, this logic implies that fewer humans should limit the harm of climate change. Is it acceptable to “reduce” the number of humans for the sake of a better environment, improved resources and saving the planet? For Andrews, the next question will be, “OK, so how do you choose which people have to go?” Andrews quotes Jade Sasser, a professor of feminist political ecology

at the University of California, Riverside, who argues that argues birth control can be used as a form of social control: “A main argument for why those coerced sterilizations were done was to alleviate the pressure that population growth was putting on state resources, because these groups were disproportionately receiving welfare.”²⁴ In the richer countries, fertility rates are declining as a result of changing social attitudes and the demands of an urban lifestyle.²⁵ Limiting family size should be an individual choice rather than a demand made by the state, such as the one-child policy in China, as a way of combatting climate change and reducing our consumption of resources.²⁶

Global warming generates emotions of fear and uncertainty for the future. In the metaphysical world, we react to our fear with different responses. The #BirthStrike movement was started by the musician Blythe Pepino in response to her fear of climate breakdown. According to Pepino, #BirthStrike is different from the antinatalist movement – its aim is to communicate “altering the way we imagine our future” with an acknowledgement of the fact that reducing population is not an effective strategy.²⁷ From the human-values point of view, columnist and political commentator Ella Whelan argues that personal decisions about child-bearing should not be disguised as a campaign to save the planet; the focus should instead be on harnessing human ingenuity to solve our most pressing problems.²⁸ From Albrecht’s point of view, #Birthstrike is an example of solastalgia as it results from a distressed emotional response to the threat of global warming.

Ecologists Corey Bradshaw and Barry Brook suggest that even a one-child policy or catastrophic mortality event would not reduce population to a sustainable level by the year 2100. Their research posited various scenarios and data for global population change including age-specific mortality and birth rates, as well as simulating different scenarios involving food shortages and the impact of climate and disease based on geographical location.²⁹ Their work suggests that there’s no definitive prescription for a solution to the challenges of the Anthropocene. Timothy Morton has pointed out that everything is intimately connected in the world of hyperobjects; a “solution” for an issue comes attached with unexpected complications which are inevitable. The machinery at work is too complex to enable us to change our habitual patterns and encourage new understandings that would allow us to escape existing conditions.

New Zealand has a reputation for being “clean and green” – reaffirmed by *The Lord of the Rings* and its flattering Instagram imagery. However, Tourism New Zealand’s “100% Pure New Zealand” marketing slogan and brand identity is a contradictory statement at best. A report from the Ministry for the Environment shows New Zealand’s greenhouse gas emissions are higher per capita than those for Japan and the UK.³⁰ In 2013, John Key, then the Minister of Tourism, defended the 100% Pure New Zealand slogan, claiming that it was not an environmental message.³¹

From Albrecht’s psychological perspective, it is vital to create positive ideas and hope in the Anthropocene. Albrecht coined the term “soliphilia” (“love of the interrelated whole”) as an antidote to “solastalgia” and as a way of promoting personal responsibility. It encourages accountability and motivates action to limit negative impacts on our emotions and produce positive environmental outcomes.³² Thus, can we see “100% Pure New Zealand” not just as a cynical commercial project, but as an inspiring vision, an idealistic statement working towards a real solution for humanity? As Morton has pointed out, ‘nature’ is a reification of hope, beauty, peace and magic. However, reification reduces the real object to its most pleasing aspect to suit another purpose, a fantasy produced to serve another entity.³³ Reinforcing the positive behaviour encouraged by soliphilia is essential in the hyperobject era – even if we start from the standpoint of idealism, aspiring to achieve goals without a realistic solution in sight.

Morton exaggerates the urgency of these connections in order to point to the cynical and artificial way that modern humans have imagined themselves to be critically distanced from the world and from nature. Hypocrisy results from the human ability to fantasise a false version of the earth, a beautiful tourism slogan or the virtues of recycling, rather than talking honestly about “shipping rubbish to developing countries,” which would be alienating.³⁴ As Bandy points out, ecotourism may well offer a false promise for sustainable development. Ecotourism treats nature as a spectacle for economic returns and turns nature into a commodity, risking the destruction of what it seeks to preserve. We are increasingly alienated from nature due to the rapid development of industrialisation and urbanisation. Nature has become a source of inspiration, escape and something to be consumed.³⁵

Humans not only feel the lack of a symbiotic relationship with plants and animals, but also with the human race itself. As technology advances, we access the economy, communications, travel and education globally and with increasing convenience. Nevertheless, as a global phenomenon, the Anthropocene is closely linked to other sectors.³⁶ For the authors of “Global Environmental Issues and Human Wellbeing,” part of the 2013 *Chinese Report on Global Environmental Competitiveness*, joint efforts to promote economic growth, social development and environmental protection are essential for sustainable development for humankind and the environment.³⁷ Thus, empathy and collaboration must be established at the global level if we are to solve the burning issues of the Anthropocene sustainably. For example, in recent years, developed countries have managed their waste by shipping it to developing countries like Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, which often lack the facilities to handle it.³⁸ A UN programme signed by 180 countries in 2019 has made a significant improvement to global health by preventing the shipping of hazardous chemicals and waste to developing countries.³⁹ Recycling is only a positive act if it enforces a political agenda that benefits all. It is yet another paradox of the hyperobject domain.

ART IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

In the twenty-first century, the Anthropocene has become a critical and unavoidable phenomenon in art practice. Although landscape painting has long been a popular genre, associated with decorative views of natural beauty, many contemporary landscape painters seek to critically reflect the idea of the destruction of nature.

As human beings, we are drawn to embrace our ability to imagine and invent to fulfil our desires. Scott Kiser points out that creators and destroyers often come as a package; the nature of the creative process involves destructive properties. However, we usually prefer that someone else bear responsible for our destructive actions, as it would be unacceptable for creators to assume the identity of destroyer.⁴⁰ In the Anthropocene, every material that an artist uses in their studio creates an emotional tension with regard to their sustainability. It may be challenging for a painter to avoid a medium like acrylic or oil paint – but even a tiny stick of charcoal was once a living tree. In Albrecht’s theory, this tension in the art-making experience could be described as a form of solastalgia.

Jiaxin Li Dani makes the point that art-making involves testing, examination and repetitive acts. These acts generate waste; some of it is recyclable, some is non-recyclable, and some is highly hazardous.⁴¹ For an artist like me, creating paintings about the Anthropocene using acrylic and canvas, which contain plastic elements, has been a distressing process – even though acrylic is considered more eco-friendly than oil paint.⁴² Some pigments and binders have been shown to be harmful to the environment.⁴³ This has challenged my plans for making large works. I struggle to deal with my emotions regarding art materials and waste, even though most of my brushes are repurposed from nature – for example, cabbage tree leaves and flax stems reused as brush handles. An artist’s waste should remain the artist’s responsibility, rather than that of the viewers or buyers.

This delicate process not only involves sorting out waste, but challenging the artist’s emotions, too. To know that I am generating waste and contributing to environmental degradation is not easy to deal with. I am left with an easy solution – stop producing art – except that it matters to me and any artist to continue making art, albeit with a

sense of personal responsibility. Art is important because it influences all kind of enterprises in society. In addition, it is a fundamental form of self-expression and communication.⁴⁴ We live in a world made up of shades of grey. There are no black-and-white answers. Living in such a world means that I have an opportunity to step outside of my comfort zone to seek creative and innovative ways of living and working.

When looking at painting, our eyes are drawn to the dominant figure in the composition simply because it carries more weight and interest. When a figure in an urban context is intended to show qualities of *sophilia* and *solastalgia* with their surroundings, they are often placed in a corner space, with a larger area given over to the landscape (Figure 3). However, drawing attention to the figure does not resolve the contradictions of the Anthropocene caused by the presence of the hyperobject in our mental and physical space. In *In my mind, I can fly*, a couple of bright, transparent rectangles are added to a complex and vibrant landscape, along with a solitary figure who seems to be immersed in his surroundings. Visually, the rectangle creates a resting point for our eyes from the intricate lines and demanding colours. In his essay "Movement and Geometry," Jim Eyre argues that, in architecture, movement evolved from the perception of space and perception from the process of viewing. In the geometric world of architecture, formulaic approaches to designing buildings fail to resolve inherent visual tension. The way our mind treats the perception of movement should not be ignored.⁴⁵



Figure 3. Sia-Jiun Lim, *In my mind, I can fly*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 1600 x 1400 mm.

Making art is a process of contextualisation through experience. The effort to interpret an artwork, multivalent insights, problems faced or a conversation held can all reveal surprising insights. Maarit Anna Mäkelä stresses that a making process is nothing less than a research methodology.⁴⁶ Mäkelä's argument suggests that my anthropogenic dialogue with my work *Click n' Pick Dunedin* is a valid part of my practice. *Click n' Pick Dunedin* was the outcome of a project where I spent a month documenting the rubbish I collected from my street and nearby bushes. As I gained insights into attitudes to plastic and began to understand our emotional needs – soliphilia and solastalgia – with respect to hyperobjects, I came to realise that my obsession with rubbish, in particular plastics, had influenced my subconscious. The project extended into a community project that encouraged people to take photos of rubbish in and around Dunedin, before picking it up and sharing their photos on the Click n' Pick Dunedin Facebook page (Figure 4).⁴⁷ As a result, plastic has become a 'manifesto object' that reflects many of the current themes in my work – a mechanism for expanding my work across the spectrum of psychology.

We live in a disputed age called the Anthropocene, and we can trace the history of it through art. We are all too familiar with the ways global warming is discussed in the mass media and scientific literature. By contrast, soliphilia and solastalgia are our reactions to the hyperobject's situation in the Anthropocene. Our way of coping is to live out a false solution, an illusion of a solution, which makes us feel better even though it is a powerless and ineffectual one – it is an act of catharsis and nothing more. Perhaps even my own work is constructed within these same limitations, acknowledging this illusion through rectangles, colours and movement. My work acknowledges the Anthropocene by juxtaposing humans with nature – even though humans *are* nature.



Figure 4: Facebook
Click n' Pick Dunedin project,
<https://www.facebook.com/clicknpickdunedin/>.

Siau-Jiun Lim expresses her art through an interdisciplinary mix of science, social anthropology, psychology and design that is intended to construct relationships within a given environment. Influences on her practice include UX/UI design. She often uses social engagement and experimentation to investigate human interaction with objects.

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