Renditions of a Changing Landscape in Lancaster County

By Tanner Simon

The people and landscape of Lancaster County are changing. Population increases and economic success both result in the development and urbanization of a land once sought after for its fertile farm land; fields once abundant with corn and tobacco now find themselves stripped of nature’s splendor; barren plateaus at the doorsteps of shopping centers, malls, and housing developments. It is this nostalgia and this romantic notion of a “simpler” time that rallied the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists—Cezanne, Monet, Degas, Renoir, Manet, Van Gogh. This drove them to capture elements of the old towns of France before they turned to cities, to capture landscapes before they were scarred by the iron rail, and to capture nature before it was replaced by artifice. With this same desire to portray contemporary life, paintings were conducted to describe Lancaster County, placing visual emphasis on the mechanisms of societal change and ideological emphasis on the outcomes of change.¹

Methodology

Oil painting was practiced en plein air to avoid errors from memory or alterations from photography and to encourage truthful, naturalistic paintings. Each painting was worked on in sessions—one to two hour blocks when the lighting and weather conditions remained relatively similar.

The locations used in this project were selected based on the criteria of subject matter, composition, and physical accessibility. Subject matter pertains to any place showing contrasting or ironic views of cultivated land and uncultivated land. Composition constitutes a visually stimulating arrangement of the values, colors, and geometry of a location. Physical accessibility refers to the relative ease a location can be viewed. In order to best characterize the landscape and to provide paintings that reflect common and recognizable features in Lancaster County, all locations were picked from roads, trails, and public spaces.

**Paintings**

Eighteen paintings were completed of locations in Lancaster county as listed below:

1. *Big Spring Run Wetland Restoration Project*, located in Lancaster, PA. 9x12” oil on paper.
2. *Ruins Along the Susquehanna River Trail, Bainbridge*, located approximately one-mile south of the Bainbridge Susquehanna River Trail access point and parking area, Bainbridge, PA. 16x16” oil on canvas.
3. *Ruins Along the Susquehanna River Trail, Bainbridge*, located approximately one-mile south of the Bainbridge Susquehanna River Trail access point and parking area, Bainbridge, PA. 12x16” oil on panel.
4. *A View of the Masonic Village, Elizabethtown, PA* as seen from the top of Masonic Drive, Elizabethtown, PA. 9x12” oil on panel.
5. *An Approaching Storm*, located at the intersection of Rutts Road and West Ridge Road looking south, Elizabethtown, PA. 9x12” oil on paper.
6. *A Study of Three Mile Island*, located west on Gingrich Road, Middletown, PA. 9x12” oil on paper.
7. *A Worker Casting Off*, seen from the Tri-County Boat Club, Middletown, PA. 11x14” oil on panel.
8. *A View of Three Mile Island from the Nissley Farm, Looking West from the Nissley Dairy Farm, Middletown, PA.* 32x22” oil on canvas.
10. *Flood Waters at the Falmouth Access to the Susquehanna River, Falmouth, PA.* 18x24” oil on panel.
11. *A View of Brunner Island from the Falmouth River Access to the Susquehanna River, Falmouth, PA.* 9x12” oil on panel.
12. *A View of Brunner Island Coal Fired Power Plant from the last hill on Bainbridge Road before intersecting with 441.* 31x22” oil on canvas.
14. *A View From the Community Church Parking Lot, Maytown, PA.* 12x16” oil on panel.
15. *Bull’s Head Public House, Lititz, PA.* 18x24” oil on canvas.
17. *A Field, located Just off the road looking west near the intersection of River Road and Scuba Drive, Bainbridge, PA.* 21x13” oil on canvas.
The Big Spring Run wetland restoration is revolutionizing the accepted practice of stream restoration in Pennsylvania. Typically, trees are planted along streams in an attempt to reduce bank erosion, but this is often in vein. In their 2008 paper, *Natural Streams and the Legacy of Water-Powered Mills*, Robert Walter and Dorothy Merritts discuss how the widespread effects of early mill damming by European colonists and early American industrialists have left a thick layer of “legacy soil” covering pre-cultivated wetlands. Based on these findings, the BSR restoration has re-created a functional wetland with relative success—that is flood control and a rebounding ecosystem.

This painting focuses on the wetland itself, highlighting the central stream that feeds it and the thick, tall grasses and sedges that would have historically covered any lowland in central Pennsylvania before early land development. Remnants of the field that existed before legacy soil was removed still towers several meters above the wetland around its boarders, featuring trees and a pasture fence. Other elements of modern land use are unavoidable in this piece—the wetlands are located on a private farm and a barn and busy road are nearby.

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3 BSR, Big Spring Run Restoration, last modified January 10, 2019, http://www.bsr-project.org/.
These curious ruins are a common sight for any Lancaster inhabitant who uses the Northwest River Trail. A Remnant of the Billmyer Quarry Village, these ruins perfectly express the way in which nature reclaims cultivated land—cracks in concrete grow from season to season and vines suffocate the bones of a once lively mining community. Everything is the way it should be.⁴

A second painting was conducted at the same location with the goal of accentuating the greens of the forest with the warm rusty tones of the railroad and power lines. This piece was an experiment in composition with the same emphasis on land reclamation.

⁴ Columbia Crossing River Trail Center, phone call to office, July 16, 2019.
The forested hill in the background contrasts the clear-cut field to the left and the recently excavated soil to the right. Houses in the distance blend in as marks in the hillside and clearly become visible in the foreground, replacing the trees that were cut down to make lots.

Some changes caused by urbanization fall to water management—which for this community is located just before the tree-line—, habitat destruction through deforestation, and a decrease in the relative albedo of the landscape, which increases local temperatures.

A storm sweeps across a heavily cultivated landscape—houses pepper the hillside and a farm stretches out in the distance. Symbolically, the storm is headed toward the community perched on the hill and is foreshadowing the potential increase in violent storms as a result of climate change.
This piece serves as a preliminary sketch of Three Mile Island. The main points of intrigue are the subtleties of the two inactive cooling towers and the sereneness of the landscape—puffy clouds billow from the stacks as the sun illuminates a vast meadow.

The simple lifestyle of this worker sharply contrasts the complicated facility downriver and the intricate lifestyle it provides via electricity.

Power companies also have a large impact on the Susquehanna river in terms of water level and quality.
This composition pulls together contrasting means of production—a community farm and a corporate nuclear power plant; tradition and taboo; ancient and modern—yet all the while the abandoned towers to the left foreshadow the impending shut down of the Three Mile Island while also serving as markers to the power station’s 1979 meltdown. As a result, this painting will soon take on the role of a historical painting, documenting some of the final breaths from TMI’s northern cooling towers.⁵

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Two paintings were done at the same time at Falmouth Access to capture the flood waters after a rainstorm. These paintings both feature contrasting themes of idyllic portrayal of light caressing grass, leaves, bark, and water which covers up more sinister aspects of the landscape.

This water, rich in Color like warm caramel, is flood water—released from the York Haven Dam just out of view—, and off in the distance, standing tall as if trees, the stacks from Brunner Island coal fired power plant sit dormant during a short spell that the plant is offline.

Coal is considered amongst the dirtiest of the fossil fuels to burn, but will be mostly removed from the power plant’s operation by December 31, 2028 as a result of lawsuit threats from the Sierra Club, according to the Talen Energy—the company that owns Brunner Island. However, the promise to end an injustice tomorrow is still an injustice today.

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Focusing on the subtleties of late afternoon lighting, this piece portrays the many powerlines and stacks that penetrate the view of the Susquehanna River. This view includes elements from Brunner Island in the distance and the York Haven Dam.

The golden rays of the morning sun cast a warm glow throughout the Susquehanna River Valley. Even the smokestacks and coal pile of Brunner Island look as if they belong nestled in hills across the river and in the view of this small Bainbridge neighborhood.

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The York Haven Dam sits between Three Mile Island and Brunner Island Power stations on the Susquehanna River—an infamously cultivated stretch of river. Power lines from the dam cut through the hillside behind it and the walls of the dam physical alter the course of the river. Dark skies reflect the unfortunate reality of the renewable hydro-electric dam; it is considerably less of a polluter than the surrounding power stations, for it only effects the waterways and not air quality, yet it is a relatively small player in the industry, producing 20 MW in comparison to Brunner Island’s 1,422 MW and TMI’s claimed “837 megawatts of zero-emissions energy,” though there are still byproducts and consequences to its operation—water vapor is a visible emission.  

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This painting focuses on the consumer side of industry. Power lines, though subtle details in this painting, directly tie houses to the power stations along the Susquehanna River. This otherwise serene neighborhood exists merely as an extension of coal fire and nuclear steam—bathed in sulfur and invaded by smog.
Based off of sketches of Bull’s Head Public House that were done in years past, this painting aims to capture the abundant middle-class standard of living that permeates American culture.
This is an historical painting depicting a women dipping her toe in a nondescript location along the Susquehanna River before dams were introduced during the contact period—water levels would have been considerably lower than they are now overall. This piece uses an iPhone screen to relay that this scene is from a video-clip and not from an actual event occurring in real-time, for it is not in real-time.\(^8\)

\(^8\)April M. Beisaw. “Environmental History of the Susquehanna Valley Around the Time of European Contact,” Pennsylvania History: A journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies 79 (2012), JSTOR.
Compositionally focusing on the contrast between the forest in the background and the cultivated field in the foreground, this painting refers directly to the notion that very little land is visibly free from human influence. The blocky, abstract style of this painting plays with this iconic imagery of Lancaster county, making a symbolic, yet identifiable, picture.
Power lines and trees stand in rows like soldiers—both are shaped by man, yet the former is considered ugly and the later reflexive of ideal beauty. However, the landscaped park is as equally artificial as the bridge, pavilion, and other infrastructure in the background. This painting uses the visual contrast of nature and man-made features to ironically portray ideological conformity.

**Conclusion**

Change is inevitable—natural and cultivated land are both at odds with society and the forces of nature, including land reclamation. Given the context of climate change, even the seasons may be subject to re-adjustment. By working *en plein air* and pursuing a naturalistic inspired approach to painting, the paintings for this project, hopefully, characterize contemporary Lancaster County.
Bibliography


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