

Panther Ovation Project

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EARTHSCI 3336 : Natural Resources and Civilizations

Sustainability in Art ; Artist Statement

This piece works to explore sustainability in the art world, with focus on the materials and process. Before planning and conceptualizing this piece, I started off researching what most art materials are made of and how they might be harmful to us or our environment. According to a 2023 article, *The Environmental And Health Impact of Paint Products*, we have had a history of using harmful chemicals in art materials. Before 1978, lead was a very popular ingredient in paints due to its ability to make vibrant colors and its quick drying; unfortunately extended contact with these paints caused many cases of neurological and physical health disorders. Before the 1990s, many paints contained asbestos for its durability and non-corrosive properties. However, asbestos contains many small fibers that if airborne, can cause internal damage to organs.

In modern day, paints are still manufactured with many concerning components including VOCs. VOCs are volatile organic compounds, these chemicals vaporize into the air while the paint dries. VOCs have been known to cause an increased risk of cancer, along with other various health problems . These compounds also can react with gasses in the air, allowing ground level ozone to build up in the atmosphere. Other components found in paint include APEs which can be extremely hazardous to aquatic life, and epoxy based chemical binders, both of which can be found in acrylic paints (Kin, 2023).

In order to address sustainability while working on this project, I aimed to use materials that are more environmentally friendly. Materials such as water-based paint, like gouache and watercolor. These paints have more natural binders and other ingredients that aren't the harmful solvents commonly found in oil or acrylic paint. Otherwise, there are certain paints that are supported by ECO-labeling systems like EU Ecolabel, or the US Green Seal. These paints have low to zero amounts of VOCs in them. Another way to work more sustainably is to reuse and upcycle materials. Art is commonly a very wasteful practice, with leftover paints, excessive packaging, and many single-use materials leading to pollution and overcrowding in landfills.

I used leftover cardboard from various deliveries for the canvas and relief details instead of sourcing new canvas paper. I was interested in the waste and recycling in consumer culture, and the way we use and throw away various materials with little to no thought over it. When an artist washes paint down the sink—a common practice to clean brushes and paint palettes—the chemicals can contaminate wastewater treatment systems, and potentially our water sources (Institute for Environmental Research and Education, 2025). In order to push this idea into the attention of the viewer, I utilized vibrant greens and yellows specifically for the paint running into the drain. The rest of the sink, along with the hands are painted with a more restricted set of muted tones that embrace natural colors. The negative space around the paintbrush and hands also help to draw the viewers eyes straight to the paint.

Throughout this process I was able to embrace mistakes that I made in order to highlight stains or irregularities that reject the idea of new and perfect in favor of thoughtful reclamation. This can be seen in the texture of cardboard, with wrinkles, bends, and gashes from general wear and tear. I experimented with transparency by watering down the paint into a light glaze. This technique, along with otherwise painting on one main layer helped me avoid heavy coatings of the paint and in turn release less chemicals.

Ultimately, this piece strives to make the viewer consider the impact of creative processes. Simply rinsing paint from a brush suddenly has many consequences that they may have not thought of before. The contrast between the muted tones surrounding the vibrant paints keeps them thinking of the connection between the environment and the art world. By rethinking the materials and being more conscious of my usage and waste, I can continue to create more resonant and ethically sustainable pieces of art.

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