Hard Realities Softly Voiced
or
Watercolors on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown

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Not much larger than a sheet of notebook paper, the smallest paintings in the exhibit are intimate, narcotic, and soothing scenes of vast shorelines somewhere far away. But why are they so quietly suspended in time and softly voiced when the world is falling apart and everyone is shouting? Why do so many of them repeat in equal size and with identical palettes that depict similar soporific views? Uniformly framed turquoise waters, sugar white sands, soft distant peaks, and bright wild flowers and grasses form an insistent background cadence on the wall for a mounting sense of disquiet, frame by frame. Because, what we take as a given one day, can vanish the next. Because, when we are sleeping, erosion happens.

In other paintings, huge waves gnaw at the shores, carrying away the remains of ancient civilizations. Because, while we are texting and looking at TV, strong tides are stealing our human histories from coastal edges.

Of the fourteen watercolor paintings in the exhibit, ten of the smaller ones are made with the waters from the scenes that I represent. We might try a salty taste of one when no one is looking. Look closely to see tiny crystals suspended in the painting surface. Plato would say the paintings are thrice removed from the original essence of water. But honestly, why do I with bother with Plato’s scheme of mimesis at all? Water in nature is universal and essential enough all by itself.

It’s because there is a place for the quiet painter, as well as for the screamers, to voice their calls for alarm. Crafting a painting is a radical act, whatever its physical size. E.E. Cummings was on to something when he wrote that the world would end, “Not with a bang, but with a whimper”. These bittersweet paintings are an arrested inhaler of beauty and equilibrium, like a pale sigh, on the verge of a nervous breakdown.
Art and Archaeology Collaboration

The *Landscape and Culture: Expedition Art of the Scottish Hebrides* exhibit celebrated the beautiful islands and classic tartans of the remote Scottish Hebrides. Running for one month in April 2019 at Chashama Space for Artists in Chelsea in New York City, the paintings continue in the longstanding tradition of archaeology expedition art. The work depicts the dramatic backdrop for my two fieldwork seasons on the Isles of Vallay and North Uist, UK. The smaller images are expedition documentations of the landscapes that had supported human habitation for thousands of years in Vallay, and the larger 22 inch X 30 inch paintings integrate traditional Scottish clan tartans into images of the depopulating ancestral island of North Uist. For this
project, I collaborated with archaeologist, Rodrick B. MacLennan, and we received two Explorers Club Expedition Flag Awards, both in 2015 and in 2017. Our research objective was to record the effects of climate change on endangered coastal archaeology sites on the two Scottish islands, to publish the results, and to provide implications for shoreline heritage worldwide. (Julian, MacLennan 2016) (Julian, MacLennan 2018).
Alert! Shredding Plaids

My larger watercolors visualize the threat of rising seas to people and landscapes. Clan tartans, whose distinctive patterns are coded family identifiers, are fraying and disintegrating in the art works. The broken tartans of longstanding island families overlay scenes of sea lochs, villages, and distant mountains. I drag a fractured MacNeil tartan over a blue-black landscape in *Yellow Iris, Carinish, North Uist UK*. The islands are depopulating due to the stress of environmental and economic impacts.

©June Julian, *Yellow Iris, Carinish, North Uist UK*, Watercolor 22 inches X 30 inches, 2017
Very little is left of the MacLennan tartan that I superimpose over a watery view and scattered rocks of a Neolithic fort in *Dun An Sticar Shoreline, North Uist UK.*
View from Mairi’s House, Clachan Sands, North Uist UK combines a threadbare clan Pearson twill with inundated pastures and shorelines. The lochs are pointing fingers of threat as they silently advance close to traditional thatched roof cottages too near the edge.
Shattering Tartans, Scattering Peoples

The populations of these islands are dissimulating due to increasing economic and climate pressures. Raging seas are indifferent to human problems and ubiquitously prevail with their own agendas. Rising water, stronger tides, more frequent rainfall and more intense storms wreak havoc on their ancestral lands. In the painting, *Hougharry, North Uist UK*, the iconic MacDonald tartan is in shreds, mirroring the depopulation of this historic crofting village.

Sensing Trouble

These images of unravelling tartan are telling indicators of my own state of mind and provide a visual metaphor for a prevailing global environmental anxiety. Since tartans tell the story of people and places through their distinct colors and patterns, I bring us closer to home and our own coastal threats with The NYC Tartan painting. It features the official New York City Tartan that is included in the Scottish Registry of Tartans. Each of the colors is symbolic: bright green for Central Park, aquamarine blue for the rivers, red for the creative energy of the city, and deep black for to the fallen twin towers. But wait! Doesn’t the pattern seem to be dissolving a bit in places? Is something amiss here too?
References


*The Scottish Register of Tartans*. 2019, October. [https://www.tartanregister.gov.uk/index](https://www.tartanregister.gov.uk/index)