What is *Fixing Ecologies on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* About?

It’s about Art, about Us, and about our World.

Now dare we look at *The Big Picture* and ask some *Big Questions*?

Like, *What is Art?*

Or

*When is Art?*

Or

*What is Art For?*

But what does any of it have to do with Ecological Meltdowns?

While we are texting, and looking at TV, strong tides are stealing our human histories from coastal edges. Because, when we are sleeping and breathing, erosion happens.

If ecology is the study of the interaction of organisms within a shared habitat, and if *Art is an Open Concept*, we can enlist Art to visualize remedies for broken hearts and broken landscapes. I propose that my following three projects show how Art can help us imagine cures for endangered coastal archaeology, personal and ecological grief, urban air pollution, and spark us to take action.

### The Isle of Vallay & North Uist Archaeology/Climate Change Expedition

I collaborated with archaeologist, Rodrick B. MacLennan, and we received two separate Explorers Club Expedition Flag Awards to record the effects of climate change on coastal archaeology sites on remote Isles in the Scottish Hebrides. Our study included traditional field surveys, local citizen science, and visual documentation of that unique place and culture. The research paintings that followed depict island landscapes that have supported human habitation for thousands of years and the distinctive Tartans of island people. The colors and patterns in Tartans are distinctive to each ancestral clan, and form a visual code to identify families. Because of increasingly severe weather conditions due to climate change, and its attendant economic pressures, current inhabitants are now being forced to leave the islands.
Art Is When something functions as Art.

In the Tartan paintings, images of shattered and Intact textiles function as aesthetic signifiers for human loss, and the possibility for remedy. Those paintings show the islands’ characteristic clan Tartans unraveling, and coming apart. The fragmented plaids are layered over the scenes of the beloved ancestral lands of the MacDonalds, the MacNeils, the Morrisons, and the MacLennans, many of whom have been forced to abandon the islands.

As the seas rise worldwide, the back story of these Tartan paintings has implications for coastal communities worldwide. Irreplaceable shoreline heritage of past and current populations everywhere is at grave risk of erasure.

Can you hold the images of these beautiful, pristine islands, and their perfect clan Tartans in your mind, and try to visualize the broken plaids as whole once again? If you see it, it is said, you can work to make it happen.

Arroyo as Metaphor – Cuba, New Mexico

In the Arroyo as Metaphor project we explored ideas of place, and the human narrative of loss and renewal. Funded by a grant from the Bureau of Land Management, our objective was to restore our lands from climate induced water erosion. At the Head Cut, approx. 25 feet of land eroded away per year.

My deep subjective involvement in the arroyo project resulted from my longstanding aesthetic relationship with the landscape, and from my personal reflections on those experiences over many years using journaling techniques.

In addition to visual and textual journaling, this project had many stages that challenged traditional notions of art media and what art can be. Conceptualized as Art as Open Concept, it included grant writing, planning, execution, assessment, and documentation. The soil, the earth movers, trucks, and rocks, the seeds, the heavy equipment, and the workers constituted the atypical art making media for the project. The art processes consisted of earth contouring, creating rock chutes and basins to prevent further erosion, and finally, seeding. These simple techniques spread out surface flows, restored wetter soil conditions, and encouraged vegetation in areas that
were previously extremely dry. The Arroyo as Metaphor project became a model for similar arroyo abatements in the Rio Puerco area.

Can an arroyo remediation project mirror life’s ups and downs? Can it allow us to see that action can soothe ecological grief? At the end, the painful dirt cut was smoothed over and softly contoured into the surroundings. By summer’s end, the land that had been impacted by rapid surface runoff had been lovingly comforted, and sprouted new green life.

**I Lichen New York**

The I Lichen New York paintings combine nature, architecture and popular culture, and show how *Art is For Making Special*. Lichens do not appear in polluted environments, but I combine them with images of New York City, and give them a new special task to act as imagination agents for a remedy.

You will not find them in Central Park, yet just 20 miles away, they begin to appear. At 40 miles, they spot the tree trunks in thick blue-green splotches. In some paintings, they form an iconic “Statement Necklace”, that I present as a living wearable air monitor. By making lichens special communicators, I hope to encourage conversations about the air that we breathe and the statements that we make.

These three projects all consider *The Big Picture & the Big Questions*. They ask, *What is Art?* and declare that it is indeed an open concept, big enough to include the human imagination.

They demonstrate the possibility that *Art is When* an artist leverages her subjectivity into a declarative art piece.

And show that *Art is For* making those emotions, observations, and understandings that we all experience, very special.

As the projects address the *What Is, When Is*, and *What For* of Art, they are performative acts of hope. They are my visual wish fulfillments for equilibrium in a world of landscape ecologies on the verge of a nervous breakdown.
References


