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The cover image is courtesy of Michelle Garvey from her article in this issue.

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PLEIN-AIR PAINTING AS COUNTERVISUAL PERFORMATIVE FIELDWORK

By Sarah Lewison

We can open a portal to the stories of those whose lives have been subjugated by acts of economic control upon the landscape by experimenting with how we look at that place. As a visual artist, I think about how spaces reveal and conceal their histories, and as a teacher, I try to nudge students away from habits of looking that presume that *what we see is all there is*, in order to guide them and myself toward the recognition, identification, and activation of a site's history. When we encounter the unknown, I try to fire up my students' imaginations, using observation and empiricism as guides. What might not be so obvious in the frame of sight?

Practicing to see differently, especially to see the traces of economic control upon the land, builds our capacity to witness and speak about

Painting en plein air. Image courtesy of Ellen Esling.

social and ecological harm, and to recognize the dis-ease of others. In *The Right to Look*, visual culture theorist Nick Mirzoeff describes how socially conditioned practices of visuality derive from the ordering and control of a subject who views from the perspective of the overseer looking over the plantation.[1] When visiting spaces with a history of human subjugation, I think about how the cleaning-up or landscaping of these spaces constitutes a kind of ordering that obliterates memories of harm. Mirzoeff asks us to attempt to look from the perspective of the harmed, calling this an act of countervisuality. In this work, I adopt countervisuality as a practice for investigating retired industrial spaces, in order to respond to them from the perspective of the lives that have been ordered and objectified.

I've long experimented with activities that foster countervisual perspectives on landscapes around us, illuminating layers of social and ecological experience over time. Over the last decade, I've conducted workshops and tours in Southern Illinois backwaters, inviting people to view and contemplate the rise and fall of small-town industries, for example, or the leakage of liquid sulfur from coal mine slurry impoundments. In this practice, I follow in the footsteps of radical geographers such as urban psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove and researchers at the Center for Land Use Interpretation, who offer people analytical tools for seeing their surroundings.[2] To prepare for a site visit, I share background information as context for participants. Once on-site, I suggest we take time to encounter the space without

Painting at the Kopper site.

goals, feeling our own corporeal reactions. Sometimes we meet with people who used to work there. Or we gather materials: plants, seeds, stones, mementos, photos, and sound. We enlist our senses to develop questions like *where did that sound come from?* The group engages all kinds of perception, including temporality, touch, and orientations of scale, in order to discern traces of habitation, colonization, displacement, extraction.

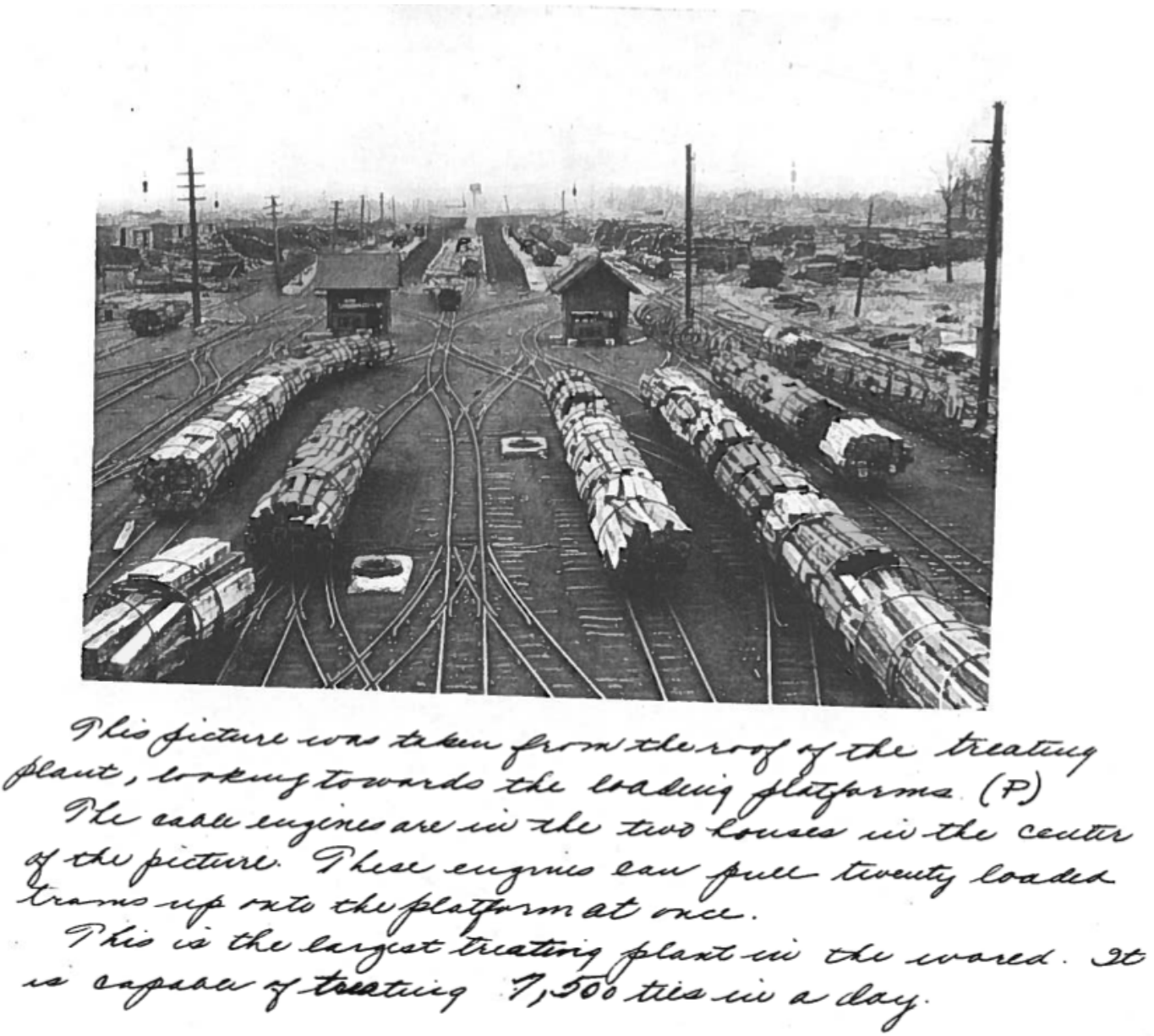
Over the last couple years, I've taken students to a brownfield on the edge of our small city for an experiential lesson that ties together local and national history, industrialization, environmental justice, and visuality.[3] We follow the approaches for sensing noted above to engage the site in a practice of countervisuality. In this article, I offer our class experiences of using painting in the field, or *plein air* painting, as a way of "unlocking" imaginations to the tangled history of a place and its impact on other places, people and nonhuman beings. For my students, coming from very different places—Chicago, California, Louisiana, and the country Jordan—there was a lot to unlock. Some of them may have encountered brownfields before in the form of closed factories or barren, gated, dusty fields with warning signs. To a city person, on a sunny day, this brownfield looked like the opposite: a grassy meadow with a majestic hill that gave few hints of its toxic past and residues. I asked the students to write about the experience and have included their perspectives in insets throughout this piece.

> Painting at the Kopper site was a tranquil experience. I didn't expect to enjoy it as much as I did. The large mound was breathtaking. If memory serves me right, the mound was man-made. I remember learning that it was built after the deconstruction of a nearby factory. The factory employed a large number of African Americans in the Carbondale area. . . . The mound resembles ones built by Native Americans. It more specifically looks like a conical burial mound. It's worth mentioning that while there aren't dead bodies there, a lot of lives were affected by the factory closing.
> —Micqwan

Micqwan surmises that people were affected by the factory's closing, but the truth is that more lives were impacted by the factory's operation. The Koppers wood treatment plant (formerly Ayer and Lord Tie Plant) was, in its heyday, the world's largest industrial wood preservative facility. Set on 220 acres north of Carbondale, Illinois, from 1902 to 1991, the plant produced millions of creosote-saturated railroad ties and utility poles to build the nation's rail and communication infrastructure. Creosote is a black, sticky substance derived by distilling coal tar, used since the 1800s as a wood preservative.[4] It is a cocktail of polyaromatic hydrocarbons containing or breaking down into other known toxic compounds, including pentachlorophenol, fluoro-chrome-arsenate-phenol, lead, fire retardant, dioxin, and furan.[5] Over its 87 years of operation, the plant employed scores of Black men who could not find other jobs in a society where Jim Crow laws and economic barriers restricted where black people could live and work. Creosote workers were hired by the day and paid on a piecework basis, a system that competitively pitted them against each other and sometimes led to violence. The work was grueling and dangerous.

To prepare for our visit to the site, my class read a 1932 term paper written by a Northwestern University student after three summers working at Ayer and Lord in supervisory positions. William S. Stewart's "Management of Negro Laborers in a Southern Industrial Plant" offers a great deal of detail about the creosoting process and working conditions at the facility.[6] Men spent entire days lifting, carrying, stacking, and loading timbers weighing up to 300 pounds, often dripping wet and hot with toxic creosote, which went home with them, caked onto their clothing and skin. Stewart notes that black laborers were universally relegated to the handling of creosoted

logs, while white employees were assigned jobs according to their skills. He describes the company town practices which regularly cheated the men out of their pay or housing, and concludes with a critique of a racist system which, he writes, the company had no reason or power to change. Each day, the creosote fumes wafted into the adjacent neighborhood with the wind; when the factory's ovens were fired up, people ran to pull clean laundry from clotheslines lest it be ruined by sticky black dust. A cluster of deaths from cancer in the neighborhood has never been investigated.[7]



Koppers Yard circa 1932 by William Stewart, in "Management of Negro Laborers in a Southern Industrial Plant," VFM 1489. Via The William S. Stewart Vertical File, Southern Illinois University Library Special Collections, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 1932.

The facility stopped operating in 1991, and in 2003 the buildings were demolished. Today a thin strip of forest conceals the site from a nearby neighborhood. New residents know nothing about it, or about the possibility that their yards are contaminated. In 2004, the Environmental Protection Agency supervised a cleanup that entirely altered the site's topography.[8] Tainted soils were scraped away by the ton, and clean soil was brought from another part of the site, creating a "borrow pit" which is now a seasonal pond. A creek was moved. The most intractably creosote-saturated soil, sediment, and waste was consolidated within an impermeable textile bladder called a Corrective Action Management Unit (CAMU). A mound was constructed to accomplish the burial of this amalgamated corpus of creosote, dioxin, and contaminated soils, and the CAMU slowly drains, like an abscess, into a tank that is periodically emptied by Beazer East, the current owners of the property. They are also charged with protecting the public from the site and monitoring the land to ensure contaminants do not trespass into any bodies of water, animals or people. Before visiting, our whole party had to sign liability releases, and security guards were appointed to make sure we didn't wander off from a designated viewing point.

> I had no idea what to expect when we went to Koppers and feel a lot of responsibility to represent what has happened here. I had recently learned the history. Hearing all the stories of the terrible experiences people had working there and the idea that there was still a community there baffled me. . . . I was surprised to see the giant mound. It was like everything was literally being swept under the rug. I was shocked to learn that the security had no idea about the place they were guarding and why the history of that place was being swept away, yet no one could mistake the uneasy feeling it brought. —Dimmick

Painting the mound.

Nowadays, one is left to imagine the bouquet of creosote that once hung over the property. The adjacent neighborhood is still mostly African American, and while some families have been there for generations, many new folks have settled there, too. The class was prepared to think about those neighbors after reading excerpts from Robert Bullard's body of work on environmental racism and the emergence of the environmental justice movement.[9] It was here before the mound that our class set up easels and acrylics, to spend time contemplating the horrors and labors of a century in a space now attractively dressed up with sod.

> The time of day where the sun was peeking out over the mound was something I noticed immediately and the sky was a deep, rich blue. I knew, immediately, that the colors splashed across the sky was something I wanted to capture: the peeking orange sun, the streaks of white interrupting a clear blue sky, and the shadows hiding underneath the hilltop. . . . The ground was also discolored with brown soil scattered all over.
> —Kenny

Our class also got ready for the site visit by looking at other artwork. To the eye, the CAMU looks like a grassy hill, opaque, revealing nothing of what it contains. We looked at representations of other mounds to think about what a hill might contain. "Significant and Insignificant Mounds," a photographic series by Jennifer Colton and Jesse Vogler, investigates exactly this condition of opacity.[10] Some of the mounds in Colton's photographs contain industrial waste, some remnants from Mississippian cultures, while others are just piles of soil and rock.[11] Like the one before us, these mounds do not reveal their secrets. We examined archeological renderings and cross sections of burial mounds from Mississippian cultures, mulling over how this mound is a kind of burial mound made by

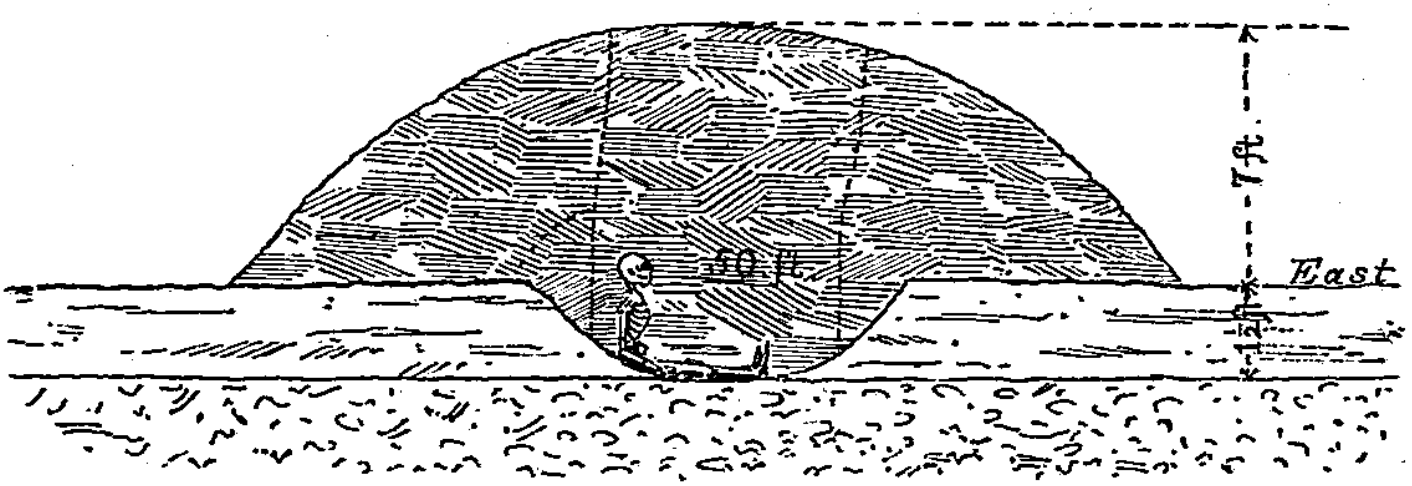
Three artists painting the mound.

terraforming the entire site around it, including relocating a creek. We considered how the thick synthetic pocket inside this mound contains something corpselike, maintained in its undeath by the drainage and removal by pump of its toxic fluids. We could not find out where this waste is taken. I asked the students to imagine what would it look like to try to show this in all of its truth, and we searched for examples of that. We looked at the work of Norman Akers, an Osage painter who depicts Western landscapes and animals in their fullness of nobility only to disfigure them with abstract scars and smears, expressively "correcting" the image to show the realities of clear cuts and chemical contamination.

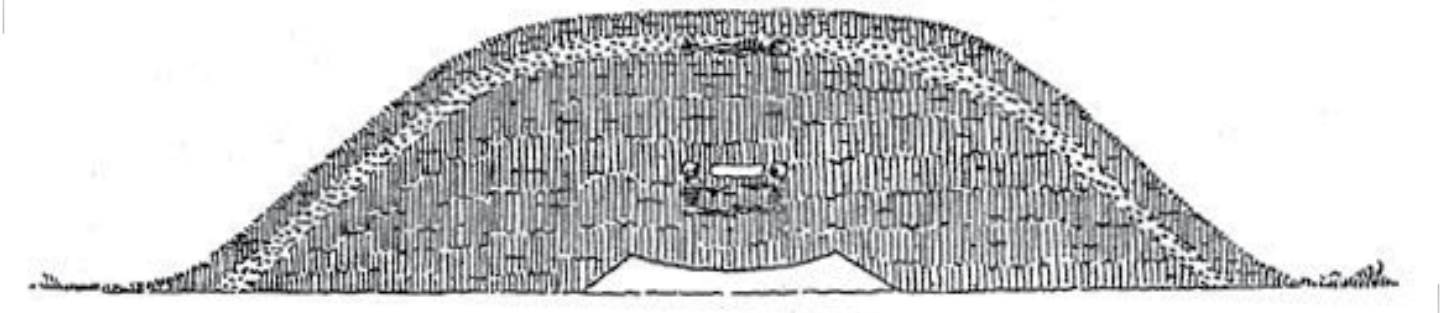
For our own painting exercises, I reached out to Project Human X, a Carbondale business started by artists Marquez Scoggins and Cree Sahidah Glanz to give people access to artmaking.

> When the classroom arrived, the organization Project Human X had multiple paints laid out, blank canvases, aprons, palettes, snacks/refreshments, and easels. The music that was playing had a quite upbeat melody like house party music.
> —Sahrmaria

On the morning of our on-site painting experiment at Koppers, our class met in the university



Section of burial mound near Racine, Wisconsin. From "Burial Mounds of the Northern Sections of the United States" by Cyrus Thomas, 1887, as a part of the Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.



Mound with so-called "altar," Kanawha County, West Virginia. From "Burial Mounds of the Northern Sections of the United States" by Cyrus Thomas, 1887, as a part of the Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.

parking lot and piled into a van to drive 10 minutes to the other side of Carbondale. Here we met Marquez, who, as Sahrmaria notes, brought all the materials we needed. Marquez also offered us tips for achieving a realistic image. Painting *en plein air* is translated from the French simply as painting in the outdoors. This strategy of painting directly from a subject in nature first emerged in the nineteenth century. It can be exemplified by the work of Impressionists such as Monet, who were interested in capturing changes of light and atmosphere in the landscape. The invention of paints in tubes made this itinerant form of working possible through their portability. The convenience that Marquez's supplies provided us parallels that history of plein air practice.

In the latter nineteenth century, dissatisfaction with the artificiality of the previous studio painting style contributed to an embrace of outdoor painting. Painters became interested in science, empiricism, and embodied truth. Communicating the three-dimensionality of physical landscapes is a particular type of creative expression. The painter commits to the labor of observation to (re)illustrate for viewers the way that light passes through space and falls upon objects. Doubling down on the question of how to represent the truth not only as light but also as social truth, the realist painter Gustave Courbet, who participated in forming the Paris Commune in 1871, painted what were considered then to be low subjects, such as laborers in their fields. Perhaps most appropriately yet also ironically, the philosophical allegiance to truth in plein air is best stated as "refusal to mythologize or fictionalize landscape."[12]

Selecting paints and other supplies.

> I remember imagining what it would be like to paint the inside of the [Koppers CAMU] mound: What if I took a mighty cleaver and sliced it in half? Would there be clear layers for me to draw or would the inside of it pour out?
> —Salaam

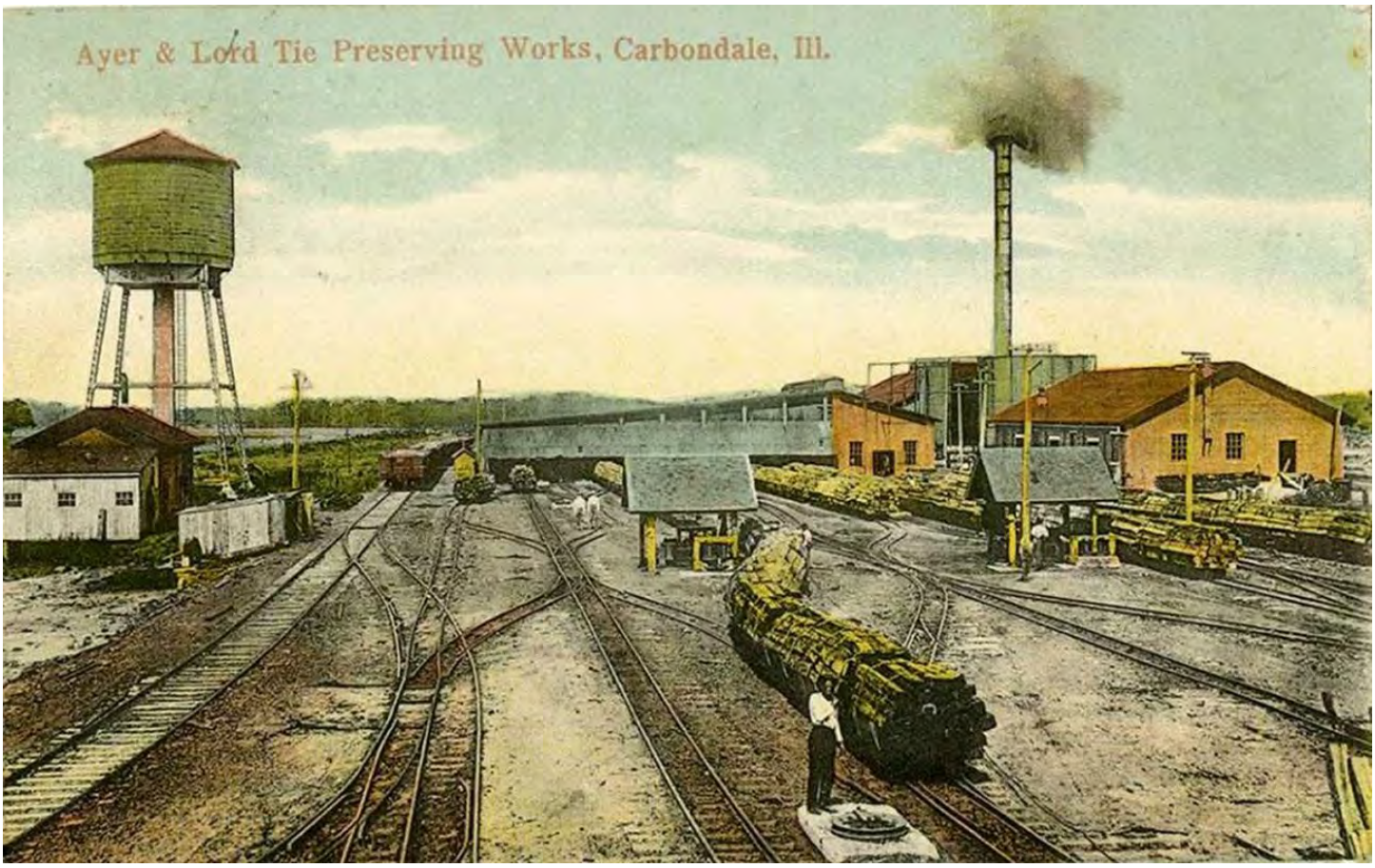
Our paintings were neither good nor realistic, but they were not bad either. That is not the point of the exercise. Plein air painting is really hard and takes years of practice. There's a cartoon by the late *New Yorker* magazine cartoonist Gahan Wilson in which a plein air painter sets his easel in a landscape and paints, not the scene before him, but monsters. The caption is "I paint what I see."[13] It is ironic that even though we were painting what we saw, the truth of what we stood before when we painted the mound was intentionally hidden. The landscape has been terraformed to convey a myth of purity and order. It was our task to honor two images at once: on one hand, the actual light shimmering over the grass and the elevation of the mound, and on the other, imagining the conditions which brought this mound into being.

Painting in detail.

> The mound had so much underneath it. Other than the knowledge of it being used to hide tons of waste, I felt like there was also life inside it trying to escape. For what could have been created during this time of continued industrialization? After setting up the easel I had this thought of a hand reaching through the mound, reaching for the sky. There was this life there, begging, hoping that when it would be released it could give back to the land. Escape its shackles, the prison that was shoveled on top. I wasn't sure what I felt when painting the mound the way I did; I just knew that something wanted to come out. Something was there. The mound had a spirit; the mound carried energy.
> —Lino

Countervisuality seeks to resituate the terms on which reality is understood. Lino's comments invite us to imagine the distance and velocity of the site's violence: slow and far, and potentially out of control as an unknown power resurfaces.

Very few images remain of the plant during operation, and the brownfield today reveals little about that past. The existing photos of the plant are visually framed in a way consistent with Mirzoeff's analysis, taking the perspective of the overseer, or owner, manager, or investor.[14] The viewer is situated at a distance, connected to the facility by orderly lines of tracks where cars with bundles of timbers wait to be rolled into creosoting ovens. We can see over the head of a black worker (switcher?) standing at the intersection of tracks like a conductor. Above it all is the smokestack, signaling productivity. The anthropologist James Scott, who writes about the production of visibility that was central to colonization and development, contends that all life and labor is directed from a central goal and



Ayer & Lord Tie Preserving Works in Carbondale, Illinois from the early 1900s.

viewing point.[15] The fact that we had to sign liability waivers to enter the property speaks to the site's potentially ongoing hazards and to Beazer East's interest in control. These current owners are a development company with a subsidiary that secures brownfields to manage their decontamination and eventual return to economic profitability.

> Painting is a coping mechanism I use for stress and anxiety. Every human should explore nature and go out painting outdoors.
> —Sahrmaria

> I wanted to paint what I saw but emphasized certain aspects. Most shocking was the flaming grass. I wanted to show the toxic land under our feet. We stood ten toes on hell. I emphasized the dying tree to show the futility of life to be sustained in such a place.
> —Dimmick

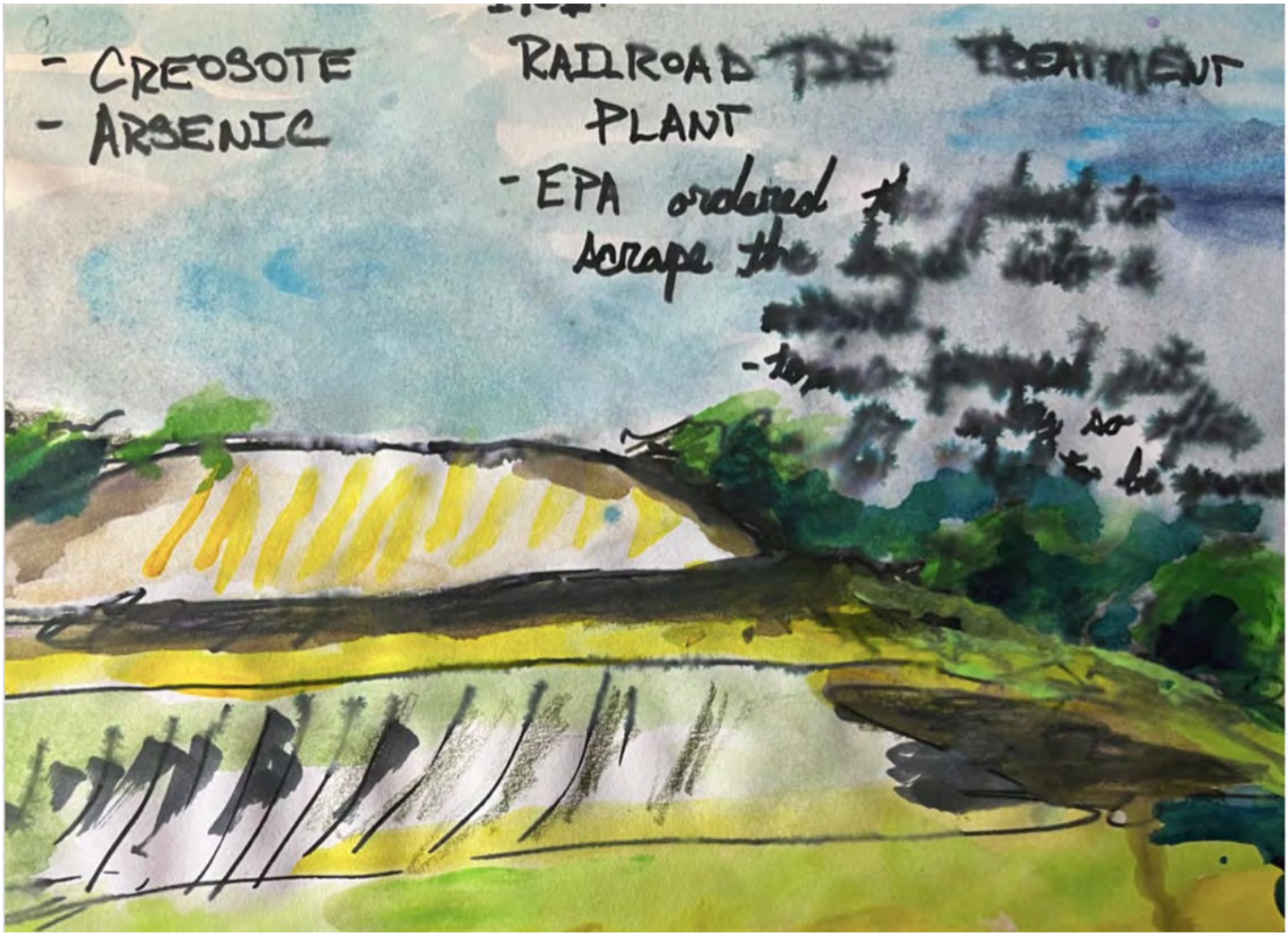
To stand before an object long enough to paint it is an act of recognition and solidarity. It requires a different kind of endurance than snapping a photo. The story of the site and its impact on the workers and their families is conveyed through a memorial located about a mile away from the facility.[16] This memorial, designed and erected by impacted community members, would also be worthwhile to stand before and reproduce as a plein air exercise. The memorial and its associated website commemorate the illness and dis-ease associated with the factory, which affected some families across generations. What other places

Another view of the mound. Image courtesy of Lino Escontrias.

and topologies are ignored, concealed, or used to hide away those who are vulnerable—human and beyond human—and the damages done to that life? Besides brownfields and industrially contaminated sites, we might consider standing before and painting prisons, mines, and landfills.

In *The Hologram*, a manifesto on mutual-aid healthcare, feminist economist Cassie Thornton ties vulnerability and damage to social isolation, suggesting that "all our crises are connected and . . . we are all a little sick."[17] She uses the pandemic crisis to show how many of our society's crises, from debt to mental illness to diabetes to environmental contamination, connect people through capitalist conditions that elevate profit and individualized, market-driven choices. She proposes instead a network of mutual aid and collectivized knowledge and care through which people learn to recognize and share trauma in order to heal through the creation of new solidarities.

Painting wounded places is humbling. It is hard enough to translate life onto the flatness of the canvas, and even more difficult if that translation involves recognizing the pain of an invisible other and, perhaps, one's own discomfort or



A watercolor sketch reflecting the environmental history of a railroad tie treatment plant, highlighting contamination issues with creosote and arsenic. The artist incorporates handwritten notes about EPA actions over a vibrant depiction of the landscape. Image courtesy of Sarah Lewison and Kendra Keefer.

vulnerability. This is one way that countervisuality lends itself to possible solidarities and emergent forms of power. The painter is like a channel, embodied, breathing, sensing; maybe the sun is warming their back as they let what they have learned ease off a brush onto a canvas.

All images are courtesy of Sarah Lewison unless otherwise noted.

Footnotes

[1] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Duke University Press, 2011).

[2] Fullilove (https://www.mindyfullilove.com/about) is a psychiatrist who studies cities. Interested readers might begin with her book *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It* (Ballentine, 2004). The Center for Land Use Interpretation (https://clui.org/) was established in 1994 to build public knowledge about contemporary human intervention in the landscape.

[3] According to the EPA, "The term 'brownfield site' means real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant." "Overview of EPA's Brownfield Program," Environmental Protection Agency, 2021, https://19january2017snapshot.epa.gov/brownfields/brownfield-overview-and-definition_.html.

[4] Creosote contains hundreds of chemicals including phenol, o-cresol, p-cresol, m-cresol, 3,4-xylenol, and 3,5- xylenol. "Toxicological Profile for Creosote," US Department of Health and Human Services, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), July 2024, https://wwwn.cdc.gov/TSP/ToxProfiles/ToxProfiles.aspx?id=66&tid=18.

[5] ATSDR, "Toxicological Profile."

[6] William Stewart, "Management of Negro Laborers in a Southern Industrial Plant," 1932, VFM 1489, The William S. Stewart Vertical File, Southern Illinois University Library Special Collections, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

[7] Amelia Blakely, "A Tale of Two Brownfield Sites in the Midwest," WBEZ Chicago, February 11, 2021, https://www.wbez.org/2021/02/11/a-tale-of-two-brownfields-in-the-midwest; author's interviews with residents Pepper Holder, Marilyn Tipton, and Robert Ollie, ca. 2017.

[8] "Hazardous Waste Cleanup: Former Koppers Wood Treatment Facility—Carbondale, Illinois," United States Environmental Protection Agency, updated September 16, 2024, https://www.epa.gov/hwcorrectiveactioncleanups/hazardous-waste-cleanup-former-koppers-wood-treatment-facility.

[9] Robert Bullard, "Confronting Environmental Racism in the Twenty-First Century," in *Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World*, ed. Alison Hawthorne Deming and Lauret E. Savoy (Milkweed Press, 2001).

[10] Jennifer Colton and Jesse Vogler, "Significant and Insignificant Mounds," Charting the American Bottom, accessed February 1, 2025, http://www.theamericanbottom.org/itineraryTwo.html.

[11] In one iteration, Colten and Vogler highlight the muteness of the mounds with phrases like "Blind Spot," asking the spectator to meditate on their simultaneous visibility and invisibility. "Significant and Insignificant Mounds," Saint Louis Art Museum, accessed February 1, 2025, https://www.slam.org/significant-and-insignificant-mounds-a-project-by-jennifer-colten-and-jesse-vogler/.

[12] Greg Thomas, "En Plein Air: Summary of En Plein Air," The Art Story, November 22, 2020, https://www.theartstory.org/definition/en-plein-air/.

[13] Gahan Wilson, *I Paint What I See* (Simon and Schuster, 1971), https://archive.org/details/ipaintwhatisee00wils.

[14] Mirzoeff, *Right to Look*.

[15] James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998).

[16] Carbondale Concerned Citizens, "Carbondale Koppers Justice," accessed January 28, 2023, https://carbondalekoppersjustice.com/; "Carbondale Koppers Justice Memorial," Carbondale Park District, accessed February 1, 2025, https://cpkd.org/carbondale-koppers-justice-memorial/.

[17] Cassie Thornton, *The Hologram: Feminist, Peer-To-Peer Health for a Post-Pandemic Future* (Pluto Press, 2020).

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About the Author

Sarah Lewison is an artist and writer who looks for transversal perspectives of ecological relation and social kinship. Her participatory and installation works on land use, extraction, care, and commoning include public readings, installations, tours, films, and hearings that invite participants to imagine other ways of organizing society. Through durational projects like the Center for Subsistence Research, a platform for quotidian practices of care and repair, her work joins play, labor, living forms and community formation to attend to materialities of place, justice, and processes of relationship.