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REASONABLE RANT

How green is your painting? Thoughts on cleaner art

By Danielle Eubank

AMERICA Recycles Day is tomorrow — as it is every year. At our household here in Los Angeles, we treat every day like America Recycles Day.

But as a professional artist who makes her living solely from oil painting, I approach America Recycles Day this year with trepidation. Here is the question keeping me up at night: “Is my art green enough?”

Today, “green” is all over the place — green cars, green buildings, green hospitals and green cleaning supplies. And, the heart of the green movement is the mantra “Reduce, Reuse and Recycle.”

What about green art? Frankly, the dialogue around green art is still in its relatively early stages. In June of this year, I attended a conference in Northern California on this very subject, titled: “Elements: An Eco-Art Conference” and organized by the Women’s Caucus for Art. It was clear that there are as many opinions about eco-art as there are artists. Indeed, superstar artists like Susan Leibovitz Steinman, Ruth Wallen, and Deborah Thomas have nuanced views about what it entails.

The debate around eco-art focuses on activism and materials used to create the art. Some artists believe that green art must have an element of activism — that as an artist you have to be overt about ecological concerns. While art can be political, shouldn’t an artist honor past green-movements artists that have been working towards greener art for decades, and is it necessary to involve scientific principles?

The ease with which these questions are addressed depends in large part on the medium employed by the artist. For instance, sculpture inherently lends itself to being eco-art because the artist can reuse materials from the flow of commerce, such as the Obelisk in Santa Rosa by artists Mark Grieve and Llana Spector and sponsored by Nissan that is made of used bicycle parts, as well as Jim Reinders’ Stonehenge made of recycled cars in Nebraska.

My paintings focus on water, one of the most fundamental elements of our environment. In order to get good sketches and photographs of water that I then transform into

paintings in my Los Angeles studio), I travel to far-off places like Indonesia, Mozambique and Syria. Many of the waters I document are grossly polluted. As such, questions naturally arise: In addition to painting these waters, am I also required to bring to light water pollution issues? Is it “green” to make my living off the misfortune of others?

While the intent of my art is to start a dialogue about our uses of water and how we deal with it, I’m not chaining myself to the fence next to the California Aqueduct to protest our dwindling water supply. Does this mean I’m not green enough?

Furthermore, it is difficult to incorporate recycled materials into my work. I paint with oil-based paints that are very fine and very expensive. I only use “nonchemical” traditional paint that is lightfast. Simply put, the paint consists of pieces of earth (pigments) that are mixed with oil. The paint comes in tubes and I have devised a method to squeeze as much paint out of the tube as possible.

Once the tubes are truly empty, I take them to a city of Los Angeles SAFE center for

household hazardous waste disposal. But where do the tubes go from there? There is no way metal tubes are degrading in a landfill (and certainly not the plastic caps) — so these tubes will be around for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years.

I also paint on some of the finest linen available in order to make sure that the painting holds its color and shape for generations to come. Yet, I have been unable to find recycled artist quality linen available in the marketplace. In addition, although I only use FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified wood for my stretchers, I would prefer to use recycled wood for stretchers if it existed.

At the end of the day, I make stuff — stuff that is intended to be around for generations. At the same time, it provides a deep connection to nature, while discussing the pollution and destruction we humans have caused. My art provides a reminder and may even be a catalyst for change in some. So is that green enough? Or maybe not.

Danielle Eubank is a painter who lives in Tujunga. Additional information on her art and her journeys is available at www.danielleeubankart.com