



SEEING LEADERSHIP DIFFERENTLY



*Student Reflections on
Art, Mindfulness, and Sustainability*



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Introduction

Reimagining Management Education Through Contemplative and Aesthetic Practice

Charlie Yang*

Art does not show people what to do, yet engaging with a good work of art can connect you to your senses, body, and mind. It can make the world *felt*. And this felt feeling may spur thinking, engagement, and even action.

(Eliasson, 2016, emphasis in original)

Meditation is what we are, not what we do.

(Spira, 2017, p. 75)

Management education stands at a critical crossroads. As business schools confront escalating social fragmentation, geopolitical uncertainty, and ecological degradation in an age of rapid technological disruption, traditional models of business education, long dominated by instrumental rationality, efficiency, and profit maximization, appear increasingly inadequate (Hoffman, 2025). While these models have excelled at cultivating analytical competence, they have neglected the inner, moral, and imaginative dimensions of human development. This orientation has privileged quantitative analysis, predictive control, and technical problem-solving, often at the expense of ethical reflection, emotional intelligence, and ecological awareness.

While these approaches have generated efficiency and growth, they have also contributed to a profound disconnection from nature, from others, and from meaning itself. Reimagining management education therefore requires more than curricular reform; it demands a deeper epistemological shift. Such a shift entails expanding what counts as knowledge and recognizing the formative role of inner development, imagination, and lived experience. In response, I propose a fundamental reimagining of management education as a *contemplative and aesthetic discipline* that integrates art, spirituality, and embodied experience as legitimate and necessary ways of knowing (Yang, 2024; Yang et al., 2023).

Art and Spirituality as Pathways for Inner Development in Management and Leadership Education

Within contemporary scholarship, spirituality is increasingly understood not as adherence to religious doctrine, but as a lived experience of connection, meaning, and ethical responsibility (Palmer, 2000). Spirituality refers to the cultivation of inner awareness, attentiveness, and a sense of belonging within a larger whole. From this perspective, spiritual development involves learning to perceive oneself as embedded within complex social, ecological, and moral systems rather than as an isolated, self-interested actor. In management education, spirituality has often been treated cautiously, if not avoided altogether, due to its perceived subjectivity. Yet this reluctance overlooks the fact that all educational practices implicitly shape values, identities, and worldviews.

By excluding spirituality, business education tacitly endorses a narrow conception of human nature, defined primarily by the rational calculation of self-interest and economic utility maximization. Reframing management education as a contemplative discipline does not mean promoting belief systems. Rather, it involves creating pedagogical spaces that invite reflection on purpose, interconnectedness, and care. Such

spaces support the development of moral imagination and ethical sensitivity, both of which are essential for navigating complex organizational and societal challenges.

Central to this reimagining is the role of art and aesthetic experience. Art resists definitive interpretation and invites multiple ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding. Unlike discursive or analytical knowledge, aesthetic knowledge is affective, metaphorical, and relational. It often emerges through direct embodied experience and engages the whole person. Aesthetic encounters can disrupt habitual patterns of perception, making visible what is often overlooked or taken for granted. Through art, learners are invited into states of attentiveness and contemplation that foster deeper awareness. Such experiences are not merely ornamental or supplementary; they play a vital role in expanding consciousness and opening new possibilities for personal and collective meaning-making through reflexive thinking (Cunliffe, 2016; Yang et al., 2023). When integrated into management education, art challenges the assumption that learning must always be instrumental, measurable, or outcome-driven. Instead, it affirms ambiguity, complexity, and emergence as essential features of both learning and organizational life. In doing so, art cultivates the capacity to remain present with uncertainty, which is a critical leadership skill in times of rapid change.

Furthermore, the integration of art and spirituality offers a powerful framework for holistic management education. Aesthetic experiences can serve as gateways to spiritual awareness by grounding reflection in sensory and emotional engagement. Conversely, spiritual sensibility deepens aesthetic experience by attuning learners to relationality, meaning, and ethical resonance. This integration reframes learning as transformation rather than mere information transfer. Students are not only acquiring skills but engaging in processes of self-awareness, identity formation, and moral development. Such processes are inherently experiential and cannot be fully accessed through traditional lecture-based pedagogy alone. In other words, arts-based practices, including visual art, storytelling, and reflexive writing, create conditions for this form of learning (Ivanova et al., 2026). These practices encourage students to slow down, attend closely, and reflect critically on their assumptions. Importantly, they also foster empathy by inviting learners to encounter perspectives and experiences different from their own.

Reimagining Responsible Management Education: The Aesthetic-Spiritual Turn and Its Implications for Business Educators

One of the most significant implications of reimagining management education as a contemplative and aesthetic discipline lies in its potential to cultivate ecological consciousness. Ecological consciousness involves perceiving the natural world as interconnected, meaningful, and ethically significant rather than as a mere resource for exploitation (Devall & Sessions, 1985). It requires a shift from anthropocentric thinking toward an ecological worldview grounded in interdependence and care. Art plays a crucial role in this shift by making ecological relationships visible and felt. Aesthetic engagement can awaken emotional and moral responses that abstract data alone often fails to elicit. When learners encounter art that reflects environmental degradation, regeneration, or interconnectedness, they are invited into a relational mode of knowing that fosters responsibility and concern. Spirituality further deepens this awareness by framing ecological issues as moral and existential questions rather than technical problems. From this perspective, sustainability is not only about efficiency or compliance but about cultivating reverence for life and responsibility toward future generations.

In an era marked by ecological crisis and widespread disenchantment, management education must move beyond narrow and outdated conceptions of knowledge, growth, and success. This booklet is based

on the idea that reimagining management education as a contemplative and aesthetic discipline offers a compelling pathway forward. Leaders educated within this framework are more likely to approach decision-making with humility, reflexivity, and ethical sensitivity. They are better equipped to navigate complexity, hold paradox, and attend to the human and ecological consequences of organizational action. Such leaders recognize that effective management is not solely about control or optimization, but about stewardship and relationship-building through practical wisdom. They understand organizations as living systems embedded within broader social and ecological contexts, rather than as machines designed for profit extraction.

For educators, this reimagining calls for pedagogical courage and creativity. It invites experimentation with arts-based, contemplative, and experiential approaches that may initially feel unfamiliar within business schools. Yet these approaches hold the potential to revitalize management education by reconnecting it to its deeper ethical and humanistic purposes (Harney & Thomas, 2020). By integrating art and spirituality as foundational ways of knowing, business educators can cultivate leaders who are not only analytically competent, but also ethically grounded, ecologically aware, and deeply human. Such an educational transformation does not reject rationality, but situates it within a broader framework of wisdom, care, and meaning. In doing so, it responds to the urgent need for management education that supports not only economic performance, but the flourishing of individuals, communities, and the planet.

I believe that management education must transcend its mechanistic roots and embrace the arts as powerful pedagogical tools for cultivating holistic, emotionally intelligent, and socially conscious business leaders. For two decades, I have integrated arts-based pedagogy into my undergraduate and graduate management courses. I also emphasize that arts-based pedagogy does not replace rational management training; rather, it *completes* it by integrating head (cognition), heart (emotion), and hand (skillful action). It prepares future leaders to navigate complexity, uncertainty, and volatility with creativity and compassion, bridging the divides among economics, ethics, and aesthetics. As Greene (1995) poignantly observed, art offers life and hope. It is my conviction that cultivating aesthetic and contemplative experience can serve as a guiding pedagogical principle in responsible management education.

The following eleven essays illustrate how my students have engaged with this artful pedagogy through their selected artworks and photographs, and how their aesthetic experiences in art galleries have enriched their learning. I would first like to extend my sincere thanks to the students who generously permitted me to include their essays in this booklet. I am also deeply grateful to Kishan Kumar, a former MBA student of mine for his thoughtful editorial assistance. Finally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Sydney Simon, Bradley Associate Curator of Academic Affairs at the Yale University Art Gallery, as well as to the docents who have facilitated our museum-based learning over the years.

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Seeing Beyond the Surface: Ecological and Emotional Awareness Through Art

Beatrice Alvarez

Going to the Yale University Art Gallery was something I had always wanted to do, and it turned out to be much more than simply walking through and viewing art. Before this class, I had spent the past two years engaging in self-reflection through mindfulness. Since I stopped in December of last year, it was meaningful to complete this project and reconnect with that reflective practice. The two pieces I encountered stood out to me in particular. Although they differ in style and origin, they share underlying themes of perception, resilience, and contemplation. After viewing them, taking time to reflect, and reading their titles and descriptions, I realized how they challenged my understanding of reality, identity, and the natural world. More than simply creative works, they prompted me to think about how we, as a society, interpret strength, truth, and the ways we define the world around us.

There is something about art that communicates without words, and Kunisada's *Bull Lying beneath a Willow Tree* did exactly that for me. The title alone sets the tone: a bull, typically a symbol of strength and determination, resting beneath a willow tree, often associated with resilience and grace. As someone balancing a full-time job while pursuing a degree, that contrast felt familiar. The image of such a powerful animal at rest made me reconsider what strength actually looks like. In some ways, it is suggested that rest itself can be a form of strength. It reminded me of moments when I have had to slow down, not out of choice, but out of necessity. The willow tree in the background reinforced this idea, bending and moving with the wind rather than resisting it or breaking. This suggests that flexibility can also be a form of endurance. The work made me realize that strength is not only about persistence and pushing forward, but also about knowing when to pause. This contrast between power and stillness stayed with me, making me question why we often separate the two when, in reality, they seem deeply connected.



Utagawa Kunisada, *Bull Lying beneath a Willow Tree*, 1829

A White Horse is Not a Horse; A Painted Deer is Not a Deer by Shifa initially challenged my thinking in an unexpected way. When I first read the title, my immediate reaction was, “Of course, a white horse is still a horse. A painted deer is still a deer, even if it isn’t a living one.” However, the more I sat

with it, the more I began to understand how the work questions our assumptions about reality and how we define it.

The piece prompted me to reconsider how much of what we “know” is shaped by labels and language. Just as a word is not the thing it represents, an image of a deer is not the same as a living deer. This distinction made me reflect on how easily meaning is constructed through naming, and how that naming process can sometimes obscure deeper understanding.

This insight also led me to think about my own assumptions and how they influence the way I perceive the world. It made me more aware of how often I take certain ideas for granted simply because they are familiar, and how much reality is shaped by interpretation rather than direct experience.



Cheng Shifa, *A White Horse is Not a Horse, A Painted Deer is Not a Deer*, n.d.

My experience at the museum was deeply immersive and unexpectedly emotional. From the moment I entered the gallery, I was able to be present in a way that is rare in my everyday life, surrounded by peaceful and intentional works of art. The visit felt grounding and reminded me of my long-standing appreciation for art. Art has always been a personal outlet for me, and as someone who is also drawn to tattoos and other forms of visual storytelling, being in the gallery reignited something in me that I had not felt in a while.

I came to understand that art functions as a mirror to society and nature. It reflects where we are, what we value, and how we interpret the world around us. I selected these two pieces because each engages with nature and perception in subtle but profound ways. Nature has always been an important part of my life; it brings me a sense of peace and tranquility. Kunisada’s *Bull Lying beneath a Willow Tree* presents a powerful animal at rest beneath a tree that symbolizes grace and endurance. Shifa’s work initially drew me in through its title alone, prompting me to question whether we truly see things as they are, or only through the labels we assign to them. Both pieces encouraged me to slow down and reflect on how our interactions with nature are shaped by perception, deepening my ecological awareness.

Emotionally, these works stirred something quiet but significant within me. The bull beneath the willow tree evoked a sense of calm and ease, reminding me of moments in my own life when I needed to let go of pressure and accept rest as a form of strength. It resonated with me, particularly in relation to how much I tend to push myself in school and work. In contrast, Shifa's artwork evoked curiosity and wonder, as though it were inviting me to think differently and question what I take for granted.

Cognitively, I found myself connecting both works to broader personal and societal concerns. The bull represented a redefined sense of strength—one that includes rest, stillness, and balance. This challenged my assumption that value is always tied to productivity and allowed me to view myself with more compassion. The phrase "a white horse is not a horse" also made me reflect on the fluid nature of language and categorization. Since we often define ecosystems, animals, and natural resources through language, this idea has clear implications for environmental awareness. Both pieces encouraged me to think critically about perception, the ways we define things, and how those definitions can limit or expand our understanding of the world.

After the visit, I found myself sharing the experience in several ways. I showed the image of the bull to a friend who was struggling with anxiety, and they found the same sense of calm and validation that I did. I also discussed Shifa's piece with my family and brought it up in conversation more than once. A few days later, I wrote about my visit to the Yale University Art Gallery in my personal journal, something I had not done in a long time but felt naturally drawn to after reconnecting with that reflective part of myself. I also recommended the museum to a few friends who appreciate art.

Reflecting on these two artworks made me realize that I often view nature as something beautiful and peaceful, yet still separate from my everyday life and routines. I also became aware of how much I long for that connection, even though I do not always intentionally seek it out. It made me think about how easily we become disconnected from nature in daily life, and how grounded we feel when we return to it, whether through hiking in the warm sun or simply being present outdoors. Observing these works helped me understand that nature does not have to be grand or dramatic to feel powerful; it can also be quiet, symbolic, and deeply moving. It also reminded me that protecting the environment is not only a scientific responsibility, but also an emotional and spiritual one.

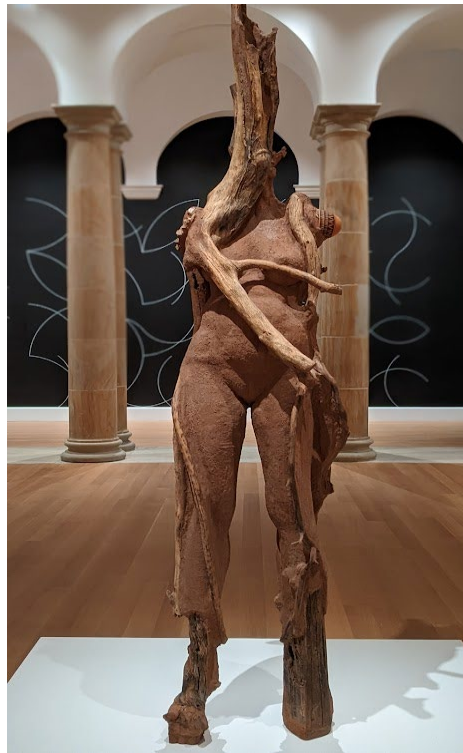
I agree that art can translate abstract or overwhelming issues, such as climate change, into something more personal and emotionally accessible. When we engage emotionally with artworks that depict nature, we begin to care more deeply about the natural world, and it becomes harder to ignore its vulnerability. Although these specific pieces did not explicitly address climate change, they prompted me to think about perception, rest, and resilience in relation to the environment. They encouraged me to reflect on what it means to coexist with nature rather than attempt to control it, which is why art is an essential tool in both education and advocacy.

Empowered by Earth, Suspended in Dreams

Mackenzie Deane

Visiting the Yale University Art Gallery (YUAG) offered a quiet space for reflection on the intersection of art, environment, and expression. During my two visits, I focused on works that resonated with me and invited deeper contemplation. Two pieces in particular captured my attention: works by Wangechi Mutu and Julien Creuzet. Both stood out for their intricate craftsmanship and layered themes, blending cultural and ecological elements. Creuzet's work, with its delicate web of colorful strings and flowing, dreamlike form, evoked the fleeting nature of memory and the rhythms of the natural world. Together, these works encouraged a deeper understanding of how art communicates both environmental and personal narratives. This essay explores my engagement with these pieces, examining how they express eco-literacy, evoking emotional reflection, and raise awareness about the fragile yet profound connections between humanity and nature.

During my first visit to the YUAG, the serene atmosphere encouraged contemplation; however, I initially felt overwhelmed by the sheer variety of works on display. Although I had set out to find art connected to themes of nature and ecology for my assignment, each piece told its own distinct story. When I first encountered Wangechi Mutu's *Sentinel I*, I was struck by its commanding presence and intricate detail. The figure's iron-red torso and feminine form conveyed strength and intensity, while its earthy materials grounded it in a connection to nature. Similarly, *In the Deep Water of Dreams*, immediately drew my attention with its delicate, suspended composition. Its web of colorful strands seemed to vibrate with movement and life, sparking curiosity about its deeper meaning.



Wangechi Mutu, *Sentinel I*, 2018.

My second visit was more focused, allowing me to spend extended time with these two sculptures. I noticed subtle details in *Sentinel I*, such as the interplay between its human and natural elements, which deepened my appreciation for Mutu's use of organic materials. With my other chosen piece, I became more attuned to its fluidity, the suspended strands mirrored pathways of thought or the interconnected forces of nature.

Visiting the gallery was a transformative experience that deepened my understanding of art's potential to communicate complex ideas, particularly those related to eco-literacy. The gallery's quiet, contemplative environment encouraged me to engage more deeply with the works, revealing layers of meaning that I might have otherwise missed. Viewing *Sentinel I* in person allowed me to fully appreciate the texture of its materials (paper pulp, wood, and stone) symbolizing nature's resilience and capacity for transformation. Similarly, *In the Deep Water of Dreams* appeared more dynamic in the gallery's lighting, its suspended threads enhancing the sense of memory as fluid and constantly shifting.



Julien Creuzet, *In the deep water of dreams, light blue and yellow flash. Arrow. Dense strength of the drill. Forest. Arrow. Flowing force of the river. Forgetfulness, buried in our fleeting memories. Arrow. We were dancing., 2022*

As an environmentalist and nature enthusiast, I was particularly inspired by how these works utilize natural and organic materials to provoke reflection on humanity's relationship with the environment. The iron-red torso of *Sentinel I*, reminiscent of Kenyan soil, and its tree-like features created a strong sense of connection to the land and its sustaining power. The abstract, ephemeral quality of *In the Deep Water of Dreams* echoed the fleeting beauty of nature and the delicate balance that must be preserved. Together, these pieces reinforced my understanding of art as a consciousness-raising medium, one that sparks reflection not only on ecological themes but also on social and personal dimensions. The experience reminded me of art's ability to challenge and inspire, fostering a deeper commitment to both creativity and environmental awareness. More specifically, Wangechi Mutu's sculpture immediately drew me in through its commanding presence and intricate detail, encouraging

deep reflection. As a woman, I found the piece especially powerful in the way it engages questions of identity and strength while also acknowledging the natural world that sustains us.

Julien Creuzet's work captivated me with its delicate, suspended composition and complex interplay of color and form. The web of thin, colorful strings, woven into a figure-like structure, creates an ethereal quality, as though the sculpture itself were a fleeting memory caught in motion. Among the zigzagged forms and threads, a figure hangs upside down, its hands traced in purple string, introducing movement and surrealism. Bursts of yellow and green punctuate the structure, while black threads weave through the composition, adding depth and contrast to the otherwise airy form. At the center, the shape of a fishing lure becomes visible, while strands of fishing line extend throughout the piece, subtly evoking themes of entanglement and fragility. What may resemble a sail or weatherproof canvas appears caught and entangled near the top, unified by a nautical rope that grounds the work in a maritime context. Together, these elements emphasize the relationship between human craftsmanship, memory, and the natural world.

The flowing forms of the sculpture mirror natural elements such as water currents and wind patterns, while its fragility underscores the transient beauty of memory and lived experience. As someone who values nature and the ephemerality of life, I was struck by how the work's materials and structure evoke both delicacy and resilience. It compelled me to reflect on the fragile connections between humans and their environment, emphasizing how easily these ties can shift, fade, or transform, much like the memories they evoke. Together, these features created a poignant and unforgettable experience. The constructed meanings within Wangechi Mutu's *Sentinel I* are as multifaceted as the materials that compose it. The sculpture embodies resilience and empowerment, visible in the incorporation of a high-heeled shoe that seamlessly merges with its organic form. This integration of found and natural materials speaks directly to themes of eco-literacy. Elements such as driftwood, a carved calabash gourd, and shells suggest narratives of renewal and transformation, highlighting nature's capacity to adapt and endure. For me, *Sentinel I* reflects a broader responsibility to honor and sustain the land that nurtures life.

In contrast, *In the Deep Water of Dreams* explores themes of fluidity, fragility, and perception. The suspended strings and interwoven colors evoke fleeting moments and shifting states of being. The figure hanging upside down, with its hands traced in purple thread, suggests a dreamlike surrender that enhances the work's surreal quality. The fishing lure at its center, along with entangled canvas and nautical rope, adds layers of symbolism, pointing to humanity's efforts to navigate and maintain its relationship with the natural world. To me, the piece underscores the delicate balance that sustains both memory and environment, mirroring the fragile threads that physically hold the sculpture together. Reflecting on my experiences with *Sentinel I* and *In the Deep Water of Dreams*, I have come to appreciate how art can function as a powerful tool for personal growth and consciousness-raising. *Sentinel I* emphasizes resilience and empowerment emerging from a deep connection to the earth, reminding me of the importance of honoring one's roots and the land that sustains us. It also encouraged me to reconsider how strength can exist alongside vulnerability, particularly in relation to gender and identity. In contrast, *In the Deep Water of Dreams* speaks to the fragility of memory and the transient nature of both human experience and the environment.

Together, these works have deepened my understanding of eco-literacy and prompted me to consider how art can serve as a medium for self-reflection, social critique, and environmental awareness. They have shown me that art can spark critical thinking, cultivate empathy, and illuminate the interconnectedness of human and environmental well-being.

Art as Reflection:

Exploring Humanity, Oppression, and Faith through Visual Narratives

Sabrina Downs

I love art galleries—the atmosphere, the quiet calmness, and the sense of stillness all draw me in. The Yale University Art Gallery is especially expansive. Its diverse collection, ranging from ancient artifacts to contemporary masterpieces, makes every section feel like a new world to explore. I could spend hours wandering through different exhibits, getting lost in 19th-century landscapes or trying to interpret the abstract forms of modern sculpture. The lighting is carefully designed for each display, enhancing the experience of moving through the galleries. I did not expect so many works to affect me emotionally. Standing in front of such incredible pieces felt like a rare privilege, almost surreal at times. One exhibition about the people of South Africa taught me about issues such as segregation, disease, family dynamics, and broader societal change. I also gained insight into American culture, including how people perceived war and what everyday life looked like in households before and during the 1900s.

The works I selected were chosen because, when I stood in front of them, I felt more drawn to them than to others I encountered. There was something about their emotional intensity that made them difficult to look away from. The contrasting textures, expressive faces, and subtle use of light and shadow gave them a strong sense of depth. The more time I spent with them, the more I noticed how different sections of the works seemed to tell their own parts of a larger story, yet came together in a cohesive whole. They were the kind of pieces that encouraged me to slow down and truly take them in. Walking through the European art section, I was struck by the variety of interpretations of similar subjects. Seeing how different artists portrayed the same figure through their own perspectives was especially compelling. Some works emphasized divine serenity, while others highlighted human vulnerability, making familiar narratives feel more personal and emotionally complex.

I also had a strong cognitive response characterized by curiosity and reflection. One painting, in particular, created a striking contrast between a shadowed cathedral interior and a brighter exterior world visible through stained-glass windows. The natural light illuminating figures outside made the interior feel darker and more ceremonial, adding a sense of mystery. Several individuals are bringing gifts or offerings, contributing to a feeling of reverence. Their small, humble forms contrast with the towering architecture, emphasizing the grandeur of the space. In the foreground, a procession of people dressed in yellow moves toward the altar in a ritualistic manner, their steady motion creating a sense of flow, as though the viewer is witnessing an ongoing sacred event.



François de Nomé, *The Circumcision of Christ*, 1623

Untitled Escape Collage was an emotional experience that felt almost overwhelming. There was so much occurring within the composition that it immediately triggered a wave of responses in me. I had just left the David Goldblatt exhibition, which carried significant emotional weight after learning about the struggles of South African communities, making my encounter with this piece feel even more intense and surreal. The work incorporates broken mirrors, dense clusters of palm trees, tribal masks with hollowed-out eyes, and the cover of *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. Among these elements, the two dark, dripping forms immediately drew my attention. Their placement made them resemble tearful figures, as though the collage itself was grieving. The fragmented mirrors and hollow eye sockets deepen the sense of dislocation, reflecting themes of identity, memory, and rupture. Together, these elements create a haunting feeling of separation, transforming struggles that might otherwise feel distant or abstract into something immediate, visceral, and emotionally tangible.



Rashid Johnson, *Untitled Escape Collage*, 2019

I had a strong cognitive response marked by feelings of pain and unease. The inclusion of *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* added another powerful layer of meaning, prompting me to consider how the work addresses not only historical struggle but also the ongoing tensions surrounding Black identity, politics, and cultural expression. The collage conveys a struggle between visibility and erasure, between self-definition and imposed silence.

Even the palm trees, which would typically evoke relaxation or paradise, felt unsettling. Scattered throughout the chaotic composition, they appeared disjointed and out of place, almost undermining the idea of escape itself. Rather than symbolizing freedom, they felt like fragments of an illusion or a false promise of a better place that remains just out of reach.

Following my visit, I spoke with both my friend and my boyfriend about the experience, especially since I had gone alone. When talking with Rakhim, who is a photographer, our conversation naturally focused on the photography exhibitions. We discussed how the artists used their work to represent other people's stories, capturing raw and intimate moments that felt deeply personal. Rakhim pointed out the subtle movement in one photograph of a family lying in bed, where a parent is checking on a baby. We reflected on why that specific moment might have been chosen and included in the final composition. We also discussed Goldblatt's intent to portray people in their everyday lives without asserting power over them. We both agreed that Goldblatt's work is powerful in its storytelling, even when its meaning is not immediately explicit. This conversation encouraged me to think more critically about artistic decisions, not just the subjects being depicted.

I encouraged Rakhim to visit the Yale University Art Gallery himself, and I also told my boyfriend that I would take him the next time he visits Connecticut. I shared several other works that had stood out to me, even though I did not choose them for this essay. It was interesting to see how differently he interpreted the same pieces. This reminded me that, while I was initially drawn to the emotional impact of the images, there is also a deeper technical and conceptual layer shaping that response. Sharing my experience with Rakhim helped me realize how discussing art with someone familiar with the medium can reveal perspectives that might otherwise go unnoticed.

When talking to my boyfriend, I shared the feelings I experienced while visiting the museum. We are currently on a shared faith journey; although we have different beliefs, we are able to explore and understand them together. I spoke with him about *The Circumcision of Christ*, as it is a depiction of a significant moment in Christ's life, and we reflected on how the work made us feel. We discussed the number of figures present in the painting and what that might suggest about the significance of the event. It made us think about how many people gathered around Christ and how deeply they must have valued his presence. My boyfriend, in particular, often reflects on why people feel such a strong and enduring connection to Christ, and why that devotion continues across generations.

Seeing the crowd surrounding Christ in the painting led us to reflect on the depth of their faith and what it must have meant to witness or participate in such a moment. It also made us consider how, even today, people continue to search for that same sense of connection, holding onto faith with similar devotion despite the passage of time. We also discussed the emotional weight of the scene. Although the figures appear small in relation to the vast architecture, they still carry a strong sense of significance. This led us to reflect on how faith can feel that way and how individuals, no matter how small they may seem within a larger context, are still drawn toward something greater than themselves.

When you are with others in a museum, there is often a subtle pressure to keep pace with them, even when you may want to linger in front of a particular piece or move more quickly past another. I first noticed this during my freshman year of college when I visited the museum with others, and I remember feeling that same pressure. I found myself interpreting works through their reactions, as though I needed to mirror their responses or understand what they were seeing in the same way.

Going alone, however, creates a different kind of experience. It allows for freedom in how you engage with each piece, giving you space to stay with an artwork for as long as you need without feeling rushed. It also creates room for a more personal and honest emotional response. When I was by myself, I felt more comfortable letting certain works affect me, even when I could not immediately explain why. The experience became less about performing an appreciation of art for others and more about forming a genuine connection with it on my own terms.

While I can see how art can be a powerful tool for raising awareness about issues such as the climate crisis, the pieces I chose did not directly focus on that theme, nor did they prompt reflection on it for me. Instead, the works that stood out to me focused more on human experience, emotion, spirituality, and faith. I do agree that art can raise awareness, but its impact depends on whether the subject matter or message resonates with the viewer. In my case, because the works I connected with did not explicitly engage with nature or the climate crisis, they did not significantly shape my perspective on those topics. Instead, they led me to reflect more deeply on themes of human emotion, oppression, identity, and spirituality—subjects that felt more immediate and personally meaningful.

In conclusion, art appreciation can be a consciousness-raising practice by encouraging individuals to explore different perspectives and lived experiences. Engaging with art helps challenge assumptions, broaden understanding, and illuminate social, cultural, and political issues. It creates space for reflection and discussion, fostering empathy, self-awareness, and critical thinking.

Echoes of the Sacred Earth: Reflections on Art and Environmental Responsibility

Kishan Kumar

I had the opportunity to visit the Yale University Art Gallery twice this semester, and it was a very pleasant experience. These visits allowed me to explore the intersection of art, spirituality, and environmental consciousness. During my first visit, I selected two artworks that particularly captivated my attention: *Lord Krishna to Save Princess Rukmini*, from a *History of the Lord (Bhagavata Purana)*, and *Blessed by the Elephant Airavat*, also from a *History of the Lord (Bhagavata Purana)*. Both works are attributed to an Indian artist active in the eighteenth century. These manuscript paintings, created around 1765 in the Punjab hills of India, belong to the *Bhagavata Purana*, a sacred Hindu text that recounts the story of Krishna, an avatar of the god Vishnu. I chose these works because of their vivid portrayals of nature and animals, which are strongly connected with my interests. During my second visit, I spent more time observing these artworks, examining their details and reflecting on their significance. This experience helped me better understand my connection to the environment, consider how art can enhance climate awareness, and explore what insights these historical artifacts may offer for addressing today's environmental challenges.

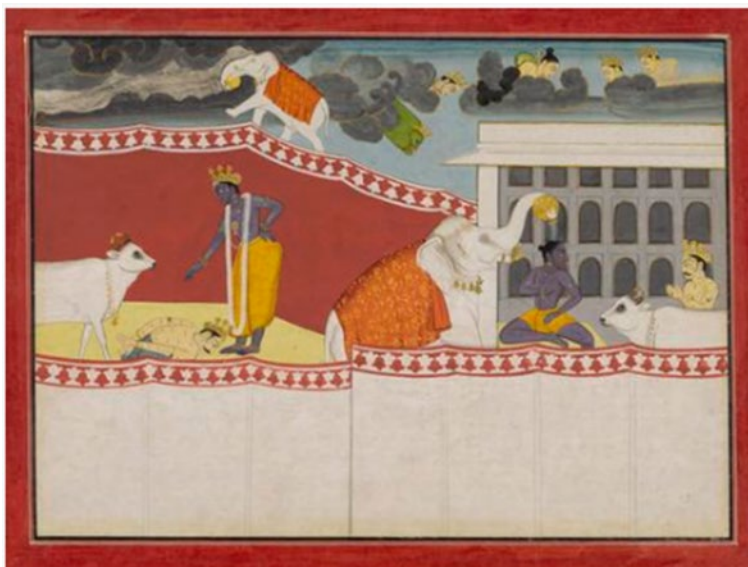
My first trip to the Yale University Art Gallery was a journey of discovery filled with surprise and curiosity as I wandered through the galleries. I was overwhelmed by the breadth of artistic achievement, from ancient artifacts to contemporary installations. The atmosphere was calm and reflective, inviting deep contemplation as I encountered works from a wide range of cultures and historical periods. I experienced both excitement and a profound sense of respect, as each artwork offered a different lens through which to understand human life. Because I intended to focus on the ecology of environmental anxiety, I examined each work with particular attention to the ways nature, organisms, and ecological themes were represented. When I encountered two paintings by Fattu, I was especially drawn to their dark colors, intricate details, and the way they integrated nature into a religious narrative. I stood before them reading the stories they conveyed and reflecting on my emotional responses, which ranged from fear to a quiet sense of responsibility.



The Hindu God Krishna Rushes to Save Princess Rukmini, from a History of the Lord (Bhagavata Purana), attributed to Fattu, an Indian artist active in the 18th century

I returned to the two paintings with a deep sense of purpose, taking time to sit with each work and absorb their nuances. During this second visit, I noticed details that I had previously overlooked, such as the delicate patterns on the trunk of the elephant Airavat, the stormy sky surrounding Princess Rukmini and Krishna, and the symbolic presence of animals such as sacred cows. I found myself connecting with these works on a more profound level, allowing my thoughts and emotions to emerge naturally. Both visits left me feeling inspired and reflective, deepening my appreciation for the environmental messages embedded in the art. I realized that artwork could serve as a bridge between the past and the present, offering enduring wisdom about humanity's relationship with the natural world. This experience allowed me to develop a more intimate connection with these meaningful objects and inspired a sense of wonder at the representations of nature found in these 18th century paintings.

Both paintings celebrate Krishna's divine acts and his deep connection with the natural world. Krishna is depicted rushing to save Princess Rukmini from an unwanted marriage while riding in a horse-drawn chariot. The scene includes a sacred cow—a symbol of life and sustenance in Hinduism—as well as a stormy sky that evokes the power and unpredictability of nature. The presence of animals and natural elements particularly captured my attention, as they highlight the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and the environment within the Hindu tradition. This sense of interconnectedness, once central to human life, now feels especially urgent in the context of today's climate crisis.



The Hindu God Krishna Blessed by the Elephant Airavat, from a History of the Lord (Bhagavata Purana), attributed to Fattu, an Indian artist active in the 18th century

In this scene depicted above, Krishna is depicted with his characteristic blue skin, standing alongside Airavat, the divine white elephant associated with the god Indra. Airavat is shown offering a sacred gesture of blessing. The painting also includes a holy cow and a distant landscape with a temple set against a backdrop of dark, storm-filled clouds. In Hindu mythology, elephants symbolize wisdom and power, while cows represent nourishment, abundance, and purity, reflecting their important role in maintaining natural and spiritual order. The presence of the stormy sky and surrounding natural elements emphasizes the force and majesty of the environment, which I interpret as a call to respect and protect nature. Both artworks present a historical perspective on humanity's relationship with the natural world, contrasting sharply with modern tendencies toward the exploitation of natural resources. I chose these

pieces because they reminded me of our deep connection to the Earth, which is a lesson that feels increasingly important in addressing ecological challenges such as climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss.

The emotional responses to these two paintings are complementary. In one, Krishna's urgent mission to rescue Princess Rukmini conveys a sense of action and immediacy. In the other, his divine association with Airavat encourages a deeper appreciation for the purity and balance of the natural world. Together, these works strengthened my emotional connection to environmental issues, making the climate crisis feel more personal and immediate. Krishna's role as a divine protector resonated with me as a metaphor for humanity's responsibility to care for the Earth. The stormy sky, which I interpret as a warning from nature, reminded me that while we cannot control the environment, we must strive to live in harmony with it. The painting encouraged me to reflect on how modern society has weakened this relationship and what steps can be taken to restore it. Overall, I interpreted the work as a call to action in the face of environmental challenges, urging us to adopt the role of protectors, much like Krishna himself.

In comparison, Airavat's blessings, as a kind and divine elephant, symbolize the power and knowledge that nature offers to humanity. The presence of the holy cow reinforces this idea, representing nourishment, abundance, and the Earth's sustaining qualities. In contrast, the dark storm clouds can be interpreted as a metaphor for the climate crisis and environmental instability. The painting encouraged me to reflect on the need to restore our relationship with nature, treating it with the same respect and reverence shown between Krishna and Airavat in the scene. This connection also reminded me of the importance of ecosystems and inspired me to consider their health as a fundamental aspect of environmental well-being. These two artworks together encouraged me to take the relationship between humans and nature seriously across the past, present, and future. They emphasize the importance of respect for nature within Hindu culture and offer a model for how we might approach environmental issues today. At the same time, they suggest what may happen when this respect is lost, symbolized by the turbulent clouds, prompting reflection on how to prevent further harm to the natural world.

After my visit to the Yale University Art Gallery, I was eager to share my experience with others. I discussed the artworks with friends and classmates, describing both the emotional impact of the sacred animals and stormy skies, as well as the deeper understanding I gained about the need for environmental stewardship. This experience also made me more aware of my own environmental footprint. Inspired by the reverence for animals in the artworks, I began to explore ways to support biodiversity, such as reducing my consumption of animal products and contributing to conservation efforts.

From these artworks, I gained insight into my connection with the natural world. I realize that I often take nature for granted and do not always consider the far-reaching consequences of my everyday actions. The artworks, which depict sacred animals and natural elements, highlight the purity and innocence of nature and encourage me to treat it with greater care and respect. The stormy skies present in both pieces confront me with the consequences of environmental neglect, making me more aware of my responsibility to advocate for sustainability. In doing so, I developed a deeper sense of empathy toward nature, recognizing that human well-being is closely tied to the health of the planet. I strongly believe that engaging with art can be a powerful way to raise awareness, particularly regarding environmental issues and the climate crisis. Art has a unique ability to communicate complex ideas in ways that are both accessible and emotionally impactful. In particular, the depiction of sacred animals and natural elements affected by environmental change inspired me to act. Through engaging with these works, I not only developed a

deeper understanding of environmental challenges but also gained hope and motivation to contribute to a more sustainable future.

In conclusion, art addresses the climate crisis in a powerful and essential way. The *shraddha* (reverence) for nature expressed in Fattu's paintings inspired me to believe that change is possible, while the dark clouds serve as a clear reminder of the urgent work that still needs to be done. From this experience, I realized that such understanding cannot be gained through facts and figures alone; it also requires emotional and visual engagement. Building on these insights, I am committed to carrying this awareness into both my daily life and my broader role in the world. My visit to the Yale University Art Gallery became an experience of inquiry, reflection, and personal growth. I discovered the intersection of art, spirituality, and ecological awareness, and gained a deeper understanding of humanity's evolving relationship with nature. The emotional, intellectual, and behavioral responses I experienced strengthened my connection to the natural world and encouraged me to act in more meaningful ways. As I move forward, I carry with me the lessons of respect, responsibility, and hope that these 18th-century works have offered, guiding me toward a more balanced relationship with the natural world.

Slowing Down with Art: Finding Stillness in a Fast-Moving World

Paris Looney

As someone constantly juggling multiple responsibilities, stepping into the Yale University Art Gallery felt like entering a space suspended outside of time. As a first-time visitor, I expected to simply observe visually impressive artworks and develop a better appreciation for technique and artistic skill. However, visiting the gallery twice created a much deeper connection with two works in particular. These pieces challenged me to think, feel, and reflect not only on their subject matter, but also on how I navigate life and perceive the environment and society at large. Through this experience, I realized that art, especially when engaged with mindfully, can be a powerful tool for developing emotional intelligence, enhancing perception, and increasing ecological awareness. In this essay, I reflect on two specific works that resonated with me: Audrey Flack's *Time to Save* and Mitch Epstein's *Lotus Pond*. Though vastly different in tone and style, these artworks felt like visual representations of my inner world: one chaotic and vivid, the other calm and contemplative. Together, they helped me better understand my emotions, the pace at which I move through life, and the broader conversation surrounding climate and environmental change.

Both visits to the Yale University Art Gallery were enriching and grounding. On my first visit, I found myself quickly moving through the galleries, trying to absorb everything at once. However, when I paused in front of certain works, I began to forget that I was there for an assignment. I came to understand the task more deeply: it was not simply about art appreciation as a concept, but about sustained attention and reflection. My second visit allowed me to engage far more mindfully. I returned to the same artworks and gave myself permission to simply be present with them. I noticed new details, experienced new emotional responses, and gained greater clarity on why these pieces had initially drawn me in.



Audrey Flack, *Time to Save*, 1979

Audrey Flack’s *Time to Save* was the first piece that captured my attention. The canvas is filled with bright colors, hyper-realistic textures, and symbolic objects such as a skull, an hourglass, a glass dish of golden grapes, vibrant flowers, and a clock. These elements seem to vibrate with tension, as though they could spill or collapse off the edge of the canvas at any moment. What stood out to me immediately was the contrast within the work. The painting feels joyful and alive, with vivid roses, butterflies, and glowing fruit. However, the longer I looked, the more uneasy I became. The symbolism gradually became clearer: this was not simply a celebration of beauty, but a meditation on time, mortality, and fragility. I found myself strongly relating to this duality. On the surface, I often appear composed, cheerful, and “vibrant,” much like the painting’s initial impression. Others may assume I have everything under control. Internally, however, I sometimes feel as though I am racing against time, managing multiple priorities and expectations at once. The carefully arranged yet precariously balanced objects in the painting became a metaphor for my own life.

From an organizational perspective, this artwork led me to reflect on perception—how what we project outwardly is often only a fragment of our internal reality, and how others’ perceptions of us can be misaligned with what we truly feel. It also connects to emotional intelligence, particularly self-awareness, which is about our ability to recognize our genuine emotions beneath the surface. This skill influences not only individual well-being, but also how we function in teamwork, leadership, and professional environments. From an environmental standpoint, the inclusion of artificial fruit, pearls, perfume bottles, and other luxury objects evokes a sense of urgency and transience. It made me reflect on how easily we are drawn to surface-level beauty and material abundance, even as deeper losses continue in the background: our connection to nature, the environment, and ourselves.



Mitch Epstein, *Lotus Pond, Ha Son Binh Province, Vietnam, 1993*

In stark contrast to the first piece, Mitch Epstein’s photograph of a lotus pond in Vietnam offered a moment of quiet reflection. The murky water, decaying leaves, and soft blue and green tones created a visual experience that felt like a sigh. This work evoked what comes after the rush, the burnout, and the collapse—a kind of emotional pause and recovery. There is a subtle tragedy in the fading lotus leaves, but also a quiet grace. I interpreted it as a reminder that nature, no matter how neglected, carries a persistent form of resilience. The image gave me space to breathe, and I realized I needed that. I began reflecting on climate change not as an abstract or distant threat, but as something visible, intimate, and already unfolding. Cognitively, the piece made me consider how easily we overlook gradual signs of

degradation. In business and in life, we often wait for a full-blown crisis before acting. Yet the wilted leaves are signals, too. Similarly, within organizations, small conflicts or declining morale are often ignored until they become unmanageable.

After my visits, I found myself unable to stop thinking about these works. I shared the images with friends, discussed the meanings I had drawn from them, and began using them as metaphors in conversation. I also recommended the gallery to coworkers and classmates, not only for the artworks themselves, but for the experience of slowing down and reconnecting with one's thoughts. These visits helped me recognize how much I value beauty as a form of reflection and healing. More importantly, they made me confront my own environmental passivity. I care deeply about nature, but I do not always act in alignment with that care. The delicate balance between beauty and loss in both works stirred something within me. Art has a way of bypassing intellectual defenses and speaking directly to perception and emotion. It reaches places where logic and data often cannot. Both Flack and Epstein's works made me more emotionally invested in environmental issues, not through guilt or fear, but through reflection and recognition. They highlight the emotional dimension of awareness—something often missing from conversations about the climate crisis. Art creates space for the viewer to process, imagine, and empathize, which is why I believe art appreciation can serve as a meaningful consciousness-raising practice.

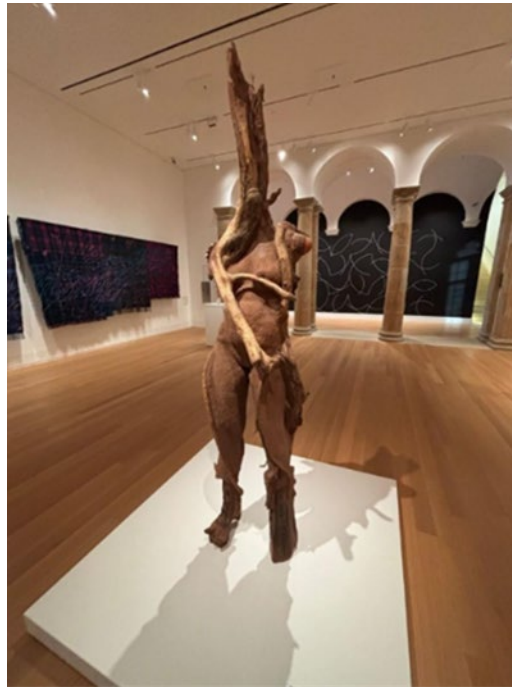
In the rush of daily life, it is easy to forget to reflect, feel, and connect. My visits to the Yale University Art Gallery became a necessary pause—a moment to breathe and take stock of where I am and where the world is heading. Through *Time to Save* and *Lotus Pond*, I saw myself, my environment, and my emotional patterns more clearly. Reflecting on these two pieces and the emotions they evoked, I have found myself thinking more critically about how I want to show up, not only as a student, but also as a future leader and member of society. These works did more than teach me about perception or environmental loss; they encouraged me to reassess my habits and priorities. In my academic life, I want to be more intentional about how I manage my time and emotions. I have realized the importance of not overloading myself or hiding behind constant productivity, but instead creating space for rest, reflection, and balance.

Professionally, this experience has reminded me of the value of stillness and awareness, qualities often overlooked in fast-paced work environments. I want to cultivate emotional intelligence in my future workplaces, not only for my own well-being, but also to support healthier team dynamics and organizational culture. I hope to one day contribute to initiatives that integrate mindfulness, sustainability, and reflection through art and design. If organizations incorporated art experiences into workplaces or events, they could meaningfully shift how people relate to both the planet and each other. Moving forward, I want to be more present, whether through mindful walks, learning about environmental issues, or simply pausing to notice the world around me. These artworks reminded me that meaningful connection begins with awareness.

Seeing the Earth Anew: A Personal Reflection on Art and Environmental Consciousness

Natalie Massa

In this essay, I reflect on my experiences visiting the Yale University Art Gallery and share my thoughts on two works of art. I explore the feelings of appreciation and discovery that emerged throughout my two visits. On my first visit to the gallery, I felt both overwhelmed and excited by the vast array of artworks on display. I quickly realized it would be challenging to select just two pieces to focus on. During this initial exploration, I considered which works might best capture environmental awareness themes and paid attention to which pieces stayed with me as I planned for my return visit. The first work of art that captured my attention was particularly striking. Standing before it, I noticed a structure that appeared both strong and imposing, yet also conveyed a sense of vulnerability. This mixed-media sculpture seems to depict a human form merged with more primal, animalistic elements. With these impressions in mind, *Sentinel I* invited me to reflect on the relationship between human life and nature.



Wangechi Mutu, *Sentinel I*, 2018

As for the second work of art that interested me, I was initially drawn to it because of its more explicit connection to environmental awareness. However, I did not anticipate that each subsequent viewing would reveal a deeper and more layered relationship. In conducting further research, I learned that a tumulus most commonly refers to a burial mound. In volcanology, however, a tumulus forms when lava pushes upward against the surface, causing the ground to bulge and rise. I am grateful for this experience, as it allowed me to deepen my understanding not only of how to appreciate artworks, but also of how to uncover more subtle and nuanced connections between art and environmental awareness. In the sections that follow, I will explore the deeper connections that both *Sentinel I* and *Broken Tumulus* have with the theme of environmental awareness.

My first visit to YUAG took place before the guided tour with my classmates. The atmosphere was lively, yet also calm and serene. At first, I did not know where to begin, as there were so many artworks

and so much information to absorb. Each gallery had a distinct mood. As I continued to wander, I found myself drawn to certain pieces. On the first floor, I felt disoriented, but as I moved through the galleries and up each level, I was amazed to encounter works by Salvador Dalí, Vincent van Gogh, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. However, I knew I needed to focus my attention on artworks related to my area of interest.

Once I reached the third floor, I began to discover works that had a stronger connection to environmental awareness and that prompted deeper reflection. Upon encountering the pieces, I would later focus on, I felt a sense of urgency and a renewed awareness of my relationship with the environment. As I observed the artworks, I felt fortunate. I came to realize that nature continuously presents itself to us, and we, as humans, must decide how we interpret and engage with the earth's resources. At times, we have taken our planet for granted, and the consequences of this will become increasingly apparent, even as they overshadow the beauty we are still fortunate to experience today.

Sentinel I by Wangechi Mutu is the first artwork I felt a strong connection to in relation to environmental awareness, and the first piece that personally impacted me. The towering figure drew me in, evoking a sense of both self-recognition and aspiration. I perceived *Sentinel I* as representing a woman who has endured significant hardship yet remains graceful and poised. The sculpture is composed of red soil, pulp, ash, wood glue, wood, quartz, stone, gourd, jewelry, pinecone, and shells. Its palette of earthy browns, beige tones, and warm crimson hues reinforces its organic presence. The natural materials used do not appear incidental, but rather intentional, reflecting societal perceptions of both women and nature. Both are often seen as delicate and fragile; however, when challenged, both reveal resilience. Similarly, our environment has endured numerous stresses, including ocean pollution, deforestation, and global warming, among others. Yet nature continues to offer beauty in the form of changing seasons, landscapes, and living greenery. Our environment is resilient; even in the face of ongoing harm, it continues to generate beauty and sustain life.



Emma Stibbon, *Broken Tumulus*, 2016

As for the second artwork I chose, *Broken Tumulus* by Emma Stibbon, the piece features a cracked tumulus surrounded by a barren landscape. The drawing is monochromatic, rendered in varying shades of grey. Upon closer examination, the bleakness of the image can be seen as reflective of the future of our planet. The decomposition of the tumulus alludes to the long-term impacts of environmental change. Human beings have had a substantial influence on the environmental degradation we face today, and Stibbon's drawing serves as a reminder of the damage already done.

As I mentioned earlier, the word *tumulus* carries more than one meaning. In addition to its geological reference, it can also refer to a burial mound. The term “Broken Tumulus,” in a volcanological sense, is associated with fractured volcanic formations. The second meaning also offers interpretive depth: the image may be read as a kind of burial ground for the planet as we once knew it. In both interpretations, the work conveys a sense of fragmentation, loss, and decay.

Between the two artworks I selected, while both engage with the theme of environmental awareness, I especially appreciated the contrast between them. *Sentinel I* emphasizes the strength and beauty of nature in a more immediate and embodied way, whereas *Broken Tumulus* foregrounds the urgency of preserving that very beauty and strength. The sculpture evoked in me a sense of warmth and protection, as if standing in sunlight—I felt comforted by it. In contrast, *Broken Tumulus* elicited feelings of unease, coldness, and fear. The drawing highlights the depth and force of nature, almost functioning as a cry for attention and care. It urges viewers to become more aware of our impact on the environment. While *Broken Tumulus* is not literally manmade, the deterioration it depicts does not appear accidental, but rather intentional in its conceptual force.

After reflecting on both works, I gained a deeper appreciation for why people are drawn to art. I genuinely enjoy visiting museums and engaging with different exhibitions, reading the interpretations provided alongside them. The colors and tones carry symbolic meaning; the materials reveal hidden layers of significance; and the scale and orientation of each work invite further interpretation. These artworks also prompted me to reflect on my own role in environmental awareness and conservation. While I do try to be mindful of my consumption, I recognize that, after engaging with these works, I can and should do more. *Sentinel I* reminded me that even when nature appears strong and enduring, it still contains a vital sense of vulnerability that must not be overlooked.

Broken Tumulus conveys a more urgent call to responsibility regarding nature and the environment. Together, these artworks prompted me to reflect not only on my own environmental impact, but also on that of others. I also recognize that I am privileged simply to be able to consider my environmental footprint. Many people may wish to make a difference but lack the opportunity or access to do so. Given the cost and limited accessibility of environmentally friendly options, it can be difficult for individuals to consistently act on environmental concerns in everyday life. These artworks reminded me that I should make greater use of the opportunities I do have to contribute positively.

I believe that in our daily lives, it is easy to become absorbed in routine and overlook the beauty that surrounds us. The artworks discussed in this essay encouraged me to reflect more intentionally on my environmental awareness, my everyday actions, and how I might improve my impact. We are fortunate to have access to so much, and we should practice gratitude while remaining mindful of our surroundings. Art can play an important role in fostering social and environmental awareness; we simply need to take the time to engage deeply with the meanings embedded within it.

Art, Ecology, and Awareness: A Personal Encounter with Environmental Themes

Christina Maturi

My experience visiting the Yale University Art Gallery began in the neighborhood surrounding Yale University's campus. Coming from Norwalk, Connecticut, where parking can be difficult to find, I was pleasantly surprised by how easy it was to park—just steps away from the Gallery—and how inexpensive the metered parking was. In contrast, parking in Norwalk is typically much more expensive and less convenient. Upon entering the museum, I immediately noticed the dimly lit interior and earth-toned décor, which created a sense of calm and peacefulness, much like what one might experience in a natural environment. The Gallery staff were prominently positioned at the entrance, behind the welcome counter, in the museum shop, and throughout the galleries. They were consistently approachable and eager to assist, offering guidance and insight into the artwork, which I found especially meaningful.

I visited for the first time on a Saturday and was pleased to see a lively number of other visitors. It was a diverse crowd, including students, families, and couples, which added to the welcoming atmosphere of the space. Since it was my first visit to the Gallery, I wanted to become familiar with its physical layout. The staff were very accommodating, providing me with a brochure and directing me to key areas such as the elevator, stairs, restrooms, and coat check. Having a clear understanding of the museum's layout helped me feel oriented and comfortable, allowing me to shift my full attention to the artwork once the logistical details were taken care of.

The second time I visited the Gallery was on a Friday, late in the morning. I expected there to be fewer staff present, but that was not the case. I did notice, however, that there were significantly fewer visitors than on the Saturday of my first visit, which created a quieter and more relaxing atmosphere. The most important insight I gained from visiting the museum twice was the realization that, for the first time, I was looking at artwork with a focused intention of using it to communicate my own messaging, particularly ideas related to environmental awareness and ecological literacy.

Coming from a communications background, I have always tended to interpret marketing and advertising elements such as logos, symbols, and trademarks, like the recycling symbol, as intentional tools for branding and public awareness. While that understanding still holds true, this experience introduced a new sense of creative freedom for me. Rather than only considering what the artist or designer intended, I began to focus more on my own responses: what thoughts arose, what emotions were triggered, and how meaning could shift depending on perspective. This shift felt transformative and became even more pronounced during my second visit. As I moved through the galleries, I began to notice environmental themes and messages of ecological literacy in many more works than I had during my first visit. At times, this influenced which pieces I chose to focus on and how I engaged with them throughout my time in the Gallery.



Lois Connor, *West Lake, Hangzhou, China*, from the series *Lotus*, 2000s

I was immediately drawn to *West Lake, Hangzhou, China* because it contrasts the natural calmness of water with stark, man-made metal objects intruding into its space. To me, the metal forms, though some are rounded to resemble flowers, still feel like invasive structures that disrupt the boundary between nature and human construction. They suggest an aggressive, almost uneasy relationship between the two, rather than a harmonious one. This work immediately brought to mind the importance of environmental awareness and the idea that humans have a choice in how we coexist with the natural world. I was also surprised by what I learned when I later researched the artist and this specific work. That context shifted my interpretation, especially because the other two related pieces are significantly less dramatic in tone and composition. Had I encountered them together first, I may not have selected this particular piece to focus on as closely.



Hew Locke, *Golden Horde 2*, 2006

In *Golden Horde 2*, I was emotionally drawn to this piece because of its composition and the way it brings together a variety of forms. In person, it is a dramatic work that immediately communicated to me what felt like a strong concern for environmental responsibility. The structure resembles a ship, yet it also suggests a vessel for collecting or containing discarded materials, which I interpreted as a reference to cleanup and conservation efforts. To me, this connection between form and function points to environmental and ecological awareness, highlighting the idea that human-made objects do not simply disappear after use: they require space, management, and responsibility even after they are discarded. The piece conveyed a clear message that humankind bears responsibility for how we create, use, and dispose of the objects in our lives. I was pleasantly surprised when I returned home and conducted some research. I discovered that this work is one of seven pieces in a larger series. This context further supported my interpretation that the artist is deeply committed to storytelling through environmental themes. The work resonated with me strongly, and I believe it could be effectively used, alongside the other pieces in the series, to emphasize and promote environmental awareness.

In viewing *West Lake, Hangzhou, China*, I was initially “concerned” by what I interpreted as a human intrusion into nature—the presence of metal within a water setting. After sitting with the piece for a while, I noticed that the metal elements were actually shaped into flowers, which deepened my response even further. This raised the question for me: why would the artist choose metal to represent flowers unless the intended message was explicitly about the tension between human-made materials and the natural world? I found myself particularly affected by the contrast between the rigid, straight stems and the attempt to “soften” the composition through rounded flower petals. This tension between harshness and delicacy reinforced my interpretation of the work as a commentary on the relationship between humans and nature. It is a strong example of how art can be used to raise environmental awareness. It suggests that we should take responsibility for our actions, particularly in relation to non-biodegradable materials, and recognize our role in supporting conservation efforts. When I first encountered *Golden Horde 2*, I was struck by the powerful use of form in constructing what resembles a ship, something that, in theory, could sail. It felt as though the work imagined a scenario in which humanity could collect the waste it produces and carry it away, transforming environmental harm into something visually compelling. While this idea is not realistic, the message is striking. It effectively draws attention to the urgency of conservation and the need to confront how we manage the materials we discard.

My first reaction to *West Lake, Hangzhou, China* was annoyance toward what I perceived as the artist using harsh metal forms to pierce the calm beauty of the water. After sitting with the piece for a while, it occurred to me that any other form of human intervention in the water might not have carried the same level of contrast or impact. The work prompted me to reflect on how much humans depend on the natural world, and on the need to promote more efficient and less invasive ways of coexisting with it. I came to have greater respect and appreciation for the artist’s intention, especially in how I chose to use this work to draw attention to environmental and ecological awareness, particularly through the lens of conservation.

While observing *Golden Horde 2*, I found myself thinking about human carelessness and the ongoing need for stronger conservation efforts and environmental awareness. The piece reinforced concerns about how waste is produced and managed, and how easily it can accumulate without consequence.

My first visit to the Gallery was with a friend. We began on the fourth floor and worked our way down, moving through the museum at a slow pace and reading the titles and descriptions of pieces we thought would be most relevant to our assignment. By the time we reached the first floor, we had selected nineteen works to review more closely. We then spent time over lunch discussing each piece in detail. To my surprise, my friend enjoyed the experience more than I initially expected. Her insights were thoughtful and often quite different from my own. She was more strongly moved by works featuring human figures in relation to nature, while I found myself more responsive to abstract pieces.

The second time, I went to the Gallery alone. This was intentional, as I wanted to move at a slower pace, but I ended up feeling even more uncertain in my selections. It took me a long time to carefully choose the pieces I wanted to focus on. Although I was able to spend extended time in front of many works, I kept returning to *West Lake, Hangzhou, China* and *Golden Horde 2*. These two pieces continued to stand out to me and shaped much of my thinking during the visit. I strongly recommend the Yale University Art Gallery to fellow students, colleagues, and friends. I was genuinely surprised that, rather than seeking the artist's attention or intent alone, I found the experience itself to be profoundly impactful. I have been fortunate to grow up with opportunities that allow me to consciously engage with and appreciate natural environments, and this background has influenced how I interpret visual art. Because of this exposure, I now see art appreciation as something that can be used intentionally as a form of consciousness-raising practice. It is an effective way to enhance environmental awareness and deepen our understanding of the ongoing climate crisis. Art can serve as a valuable tool for initiating dialogue, and I think it should be used more often in support of these discussions and as a means of reinforcing conservation efforts.

Stillness and Renewal: Encountering Nature through Art

Noelle Rousseau

During my two visits to the New Britain Museum of American Art, I found myself drawn to works that encouraged me to think more deeply about how we perceive and interact with nature. Although this assignment originally centered on the Yale University Art Gallery, the NBMAA is much closer to where I live in Bristol, Connecticut, which made it easier for me to visit and spend time there. The two artworks I selected stood out because of their contrasting styles, time periods, and approaches to representing nature. One is bold and symbolically placed within a domestic interior setting, while the other is soft and impressionistic, capturing the quiet awakening of the natural world in spring. Together, these works prompted emotional, intellectual, and environmental reflections that led me to reconsider my relationship with nature and the role of art in fostering ecological awareness.

Upon entering the museum, I immediately noticed how quiet and peaceful the atmosphere felt. The arrangement of the galleries encouraged me to slow down and spend more intentional time with each piece, rather than quickly glancing and moving on—something that often feels difficult in everyday life. As I moved through the different rooms, I began to notice how frequently artists used nature either as a central focus or as a subtle backdrop in their work. The variety of pieces created different impressions on me and highlighted how art can communicate emotions and ideas in ways that words often cannot. I also realized that artists may express similar themes through very different styles and techniques, each shaping the viewer's experience in a unique way. I particularly appreciated how many of the works connected natural imagery to historical and cultural context, adding further depth to their meaning.



Anna Valdez, *Pheasant*, 2023

The combination of art and history, in fact, gave me a wider perspective, reminding me that human relationships with nature have always been shaped by time, culture, and circumstance. For instance, Valdez's composition is bold and vibrant, while Lawson's landscape feels softer and more muted. Valdez's *Pheasant* uses vibrant colors and a carefully arranged composition—including plants and a pheasant—to create a scene that feels both intentional and controlled. The plants in her work do not appear to grow wild;

instead, they are placed within an interior setting, suggesting how people often bring fragments of the natural world into their homes as decoration or comfort. This feels especially relevant in modern life, where direct contact with nature can be limited.

In contrast, Lawson's *Spring Tapestry* presents a peaceful, open landscape filled with soft light and blossoming trees, offering a more direct and immersive view of nature. His painting captures the feeling of seasonal renewal and serves as a reminder of natural cycles that continue regardless of human attention. Both works reflect nature's role in everyday life—one showing how humans shape and frame nature within constructed environments, and the other celebrating nature as it exists on its own terms. Together, they made me more aware of how art can prompt reflection on the environment, highlighting both its beauty and its fragility.

While observing Anna Valdez's *Pheasant* (2023) and Ernest Lawson's *Spring Tapestry* (1930), I experienced two very different emotional reactions, both of which stayed with me long after I left the museum. When I first stood in front of Valdez's *Pheasant*, I felt a sense of curiosity and even comfort. The bright, bold colors and carefully arranged objects reminded me of intimate, personal spaces such as a living room or an artist's studio. I found myself drawn to the way the plants and the pheasant together created a mood that was both calm and slightly mysterious. The pheasant, in particular, made me wonder about its significance, whether it functioned as a symbol, a memory, or a quiet commentary on how nature is often preserved, arranged, and displayed rather than experienced in the wild. The piece also gave me some inspiration for how I might think about designing my own living spaces, especially in terms of bringing natural elements indoors in a more intentional way.



Ernest Lawson, *Spring Tapestry*, ca. 1930

Currently, I live in an apartment where I cannot make bold design changes, but in the future, when I own my own space, I know I want bright colors and plenty of plants throughout my home. Bright colors and greenery bring me a great deal of joy, which is likely why this piece resonated with me so strongly. In contrast, Lawson's *Spring Tapestry* created a feeling of calm and quiet appreciation. The soft, natural colors and loose brushstrokes give the scene a dreamlike quality, as if the viewer is being invited into a peaceful moment from the past. It reminded me of spring walks and the sense of hope and renewal that comes with changing seasons. The painting also evokes ideas of growth and regeneration, particularly through its depiction of trees in bloom. One of the reasons I have always been drawn to plants is their resilience: their

ability to appear lifeless or withered and then return, often stronger and more vibrant than before. Both works, in their own ways, reflect the quiet persistence of nature, whether through careful human care or through nature's independent cycles.

Reflecting more deeply on the meanings behind each piece, I saw Valdez's painting, with its vibrant arrangement of plants, patterns, and the pheasant, as a commentary on how humans interact with and display nature within personal spaces. The pheasant, which appears either as a decorative taxidermy or symbolic element, made me think about the way nature is often transformed into an object of display—something to be admired rather than fully experienced in its living form. The plants, carefully arranged within the composition, further suggest the human tendency to control and frame nature rather than allowing it to grow freely. In contrast, *Spring Tapestry* by Ernest Lawson seems to invite a more open and meditative interpretation, offering a broader sense of space and a more direct encounter with the natural world.

The landscape, with its soft spring colors and loose, flowing brushwork, conveys a sense of harmony and renewal. It encourages reflection on the cycles of nature and the quiet, enduring beauty found within them. The painting also evokes a sense of a time before industrial growth significantly altered the American landscape, giving it an almost historical or nostalgic quality. Together, these two works taught me that art can highlight different ways of seeing the natural world, either as something we shape for comfort and aesthetic enjoyment, or as something that exists independently of human influence, waiting to be observed and appreciated.

I also found myself reflecting on why these works drew me in so strongly. Both pieces center on plants and nature, and I realized this connection mirrors an important part of my own personality. I have always felt a sense of calm and comfort when surrounded by natural elements, whether indoors or outdoors. Valdez's work, with its bold arrangement and intimate, lived-in atmosphere, made me think about how much I enjoy creating personal spaces that feel both expressive and connected to nature. Lawson's landscape, on the other hand, speaks more to my quieter side—the part of me that values peaceful, simple beauty without distraction. This reflection not only helped me understand why these works stood out to me, but also encouraged me to notice these preferences in other areas of my life, from how I choose to decorate my space to how I seek out nature in order to feel grounded.

Reflecting on my visit to the New Britain Museum of American Art, I realized the experience offered more than just an opportunity to view compelling artworks; it also provided a space for personal reflection and inspiration. As I moved through the museum, I noticed how many artists across different time periods and styles used natural themes either as a central focus or as a quiet backdrop within their work. Some pieces felt modern and bold, while others felt nostalgic, like memories preserved on canvas. Across these varied works, it became clear that artists frequently turn to nature as a subject to reflect their surroundings or to express emotions that are difficult to put into words. Whether used to celebrate beauty, convey loss, or highlight environmental and cultural change, the presence of nature in these works was impossible to ignore. Being surrounded by such a wide range of interpretations helped me understand how artists use nature not only to create visual beauty, but also to tell deeper stories about their time, their personal experiences, and the environments they inhabit.

Focusing on Anna Valdez's *Pheasant* and Ernest Lawson's *Spring Tapestry* deepened that reflection even further. Both pieces reminded me of the quiet but essential role nature plays in my life as a source of comfort, creativity, and emotional grounding. The contrast between these two works made me

more aware of how different the experience of nature can be when it is directly encountered versus when it is observed from a distance through the lens of art. In Lawson's piece, nature feels more expansive and slightly out of reach, suggesting that the natural world continues to exist with or without human attention. At the same time, art has a way of quietly drawing nature back into focus, encouraging viewers to notice details, emotions, and narratives that might otherwise be overlooked. This made me more aware of how easily the natural world can fade into the background of daily life, and how art can help bring it back into awareness.

My visit to the New Britain Museum of American Art also encouraged me to reflect not only on my personal connection to nature, but also on the role art can play in raising environmental awareness. Throughout my time exploring the galleries, I realized that art has a unique ability to slow people down and encourage closer observation of the world around them, something that is often difficult in everyday routines. Whether the works were bold and modern or soft and nostalgic, each piece offered a different perspective on nature, reinforcing the idea that it is constantly being reinterpreted through time and experience. For me, this experience strengthened the idea that art can function as a form of consciousness-raising. It encourages viewers to pay attention, to reflect, and to emotionally engage with ideas and issues they might otherwise overlook, including the beauty, fragility, and persistence of the natural world.

The paintings I focused on, *Pheasant* by Anna Valdez and *Spring Tapestry* by Ernest Lawson, both demonstrated this in distinct ways, drawing attention to the relationship between humans and nature. They reminded me that nature is always present, whether it exists as part of a carefully curated home environment or as part of a sprawling, untamed landscape. Our relationship with the environment is often shaped by how much attention we choose to give it. Experiencing the museum taught me that art does not simply show us what nature looks like; it also challenges us to consider how we relate to it, what we value, and why that relationship matters for both personal growth and the future of the planet. Art can offer not only beauty, but also reflection and inspiration. Leaving the museum, I felt more grounded, more mindful, and more curious about the ways art and nature intersect, both on the canvas and in the real world.

From Landscape to Inner Space: Interpreting Bierstadt and Hopper through Mindful Observation

Marissa Russo

I visited the Yale University Art Gallery on Tuesday morning by myself, and it was a calm and relaxing experience. The gallery was not very busy at that time, which allowed me to take my time and browse at my own pace. Although I was not entirely sure what to expect, I found the experience to be very rewarding and meaningful. The gallery itself was a beautiful, historic space with natural light and thoughtfully curated exhibits that encourage reflection and connection. With collections ranging from ancient to modern art, each room offered something unique and engaging. As I walked through the gallery, I practiced mindfulness by paying attention to the emotions I experienced and how each piece of art affected me. I began with the American art collection, which included works from the colonial period through the modern era, highlighting everything from early American folk art to 19th-century landscapes. The layout of the museum allowed for quiet moments to stand close to each piece, giving me the opportunity to absorb the colors, brushwork, and emotional tone up close.

In the African art collection, I was drawn to traditional carvings, textiles, and ceremonial artifacts, each carrying strong cultural significance and historical context. Moving into the European works, I viewed paintings by artists such as Van Gogh and Picasso, which prompted me to think about the evolution of Western art styles and their influence on modern aesthetics. As I continued through the gallery, I noticed dedicated spaces for rest, which made it easy to pause and take breaks throughout the visit. Along the way, helpful guides and self-guided tour materials provided deeper insight into the history and symbolism behind the works, enriching my overall experience.

Visiting the Yale University Art Gallery has given me the opportunity to learn more about art, history, culture, and human experience. The gallery features artworks by some of the world's most influential artists across a wide range of centuries and cultures. Through this collection, I have learned about different artistic techniques, including Renaissance oil painting, 19th-century Impressionism, and contemporary mixed media. By observing the skill, detail, and variety of these works, I have developed a deeper understanding of how artistic materials and methods evolve over time. Art often reflects the period in which it was created. The gallery's collection spans multiple regions, time periods, and movements, offering insight into how art can mirror historical events, social change, and cultural shifts. I have seen how artistic expression is both influenced by and reflective of political revolutions, economic developments, and technological advancements.

One of the most compelling aspects of the gallery is how art represents a wide range of human emotions, experiences, and ideas. The diverse collection encourages visitors to see the world through the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds and lived experiences. By studying works closely, I also began to learn more about myself: what draws my attention, what emotions arise, and how I interpret meaning in what I see. This experience has taught me to slow down, engage more mindfully with my surroundings, and develop a deeper appreciation for observation. By being fully present and immersing myself in the artwork, I was able to focus on my thoughts and emotional responses as they emerged in real time. This kind of mindful engagement became a deeply personal and reflective experience for me.



Albert Bierstadt, *Yosemite Valley, Glacier Point Trail*, c.1873

The first piece of artwork that caught my eye was *Yosemite Valley, Glacier Point Trail* by Albert Bierstadt. Upon further research, I learned that Bierstadt was a German-born artist who immigrated to the United States and became known for his romanticized depictions of the American West during the 19th century. His paintings often emphasized the grandeur of unspoiled nature, aligning with contemporary ideas about westward expansion and the perceived divine presence within the natural landscape. The breathtaking quality of *Yosemite Valley, Glacier Point Trail* stood out to me, particularly through its striking interplay of light and shadow, which vividly conveys the beauty of the natural world.

I found myself especially drawn to landscape paintings in general, as I have a strong appreciation for the outdoors and natural environments. The detailed composition and luminous atmosphere of the Yosemite scene captured my attention, especially since it depicts a place I have always hoped to visit. I selected this artwork because of its ability to communicate both tranquility and simplicity within nature. From engaging with this piece, I began to form meanings connected to the beauty and fragility of untouched landscapes, as well as the importance of preserving such environments in a rapidly changing world. My overall understanding of Bierstadt's work is that it captures not only physical space, but also an idealized vision of nature shaped by cultural and historical context.



Edward Hopper, *Rooms by the Sea*, 1951

The second piece of artwork that caught my eye was Edward Hopper's *Rooms by the Sea*, a work that serves as a hallmark of his exploration of solitude, light, and space. Upon further research, I learned that it was inspired by Hopper's studio in Truro, Massachusetts, which was located near the ocean. Although the scene appears to depict a door opening directly onto the sea, it is actually a stylized abstraction rather than a literal representation. Hopper often used this kind of compositional approach to emphasize mood and symbolism over realism. The allure of *Rooms by the Sea* lies in its masterful depiction of isolation and tranquility, which resonated with me on an emotional level. When I first encountered the piece, it evoked a range of different feelings. Because there is little action or narrative detail, the meaning of the painting feels open to interpretation by the viewer. The quiet, empty room contrasted with the vast expanse of the ocean creates a powerful sense of both stillness and openness, as if the doorway itself leads into a space of possibility and freedom.

What I found most compelling is how the absence of human presence allows the viewer to step into the scene from a first-person perspective and engage with it personally. Visually, the painting embodies a subtle tension between light and shadow, conveying both melancholy and hope at the same time. By taking time to observe it closely, I interpreted the open doorway as a symbol of transition and possibility, suggesting the invitation to move toward the unknown while leaving familiarity behind. This sense of personal connection, combined with its universal themes of longing and self-discovery, is what makes this work especially powerful and meaningful to me.

Reflecting on *Yosemite Valley*, *Glacier Point Trail* by Albert Bierstadt and *Rooms by the Sea* by Edward Hopper has deepened my understanding of my own thoughts and emotional responses. Bierstadt's portrayal of nature's grandeur and simplicity gave me a sense of respect for the environment and an awareness of humanity's small place within the vastness of the natural world. In contrast, Hopper's minimalist scene highlights the quiet complexity of solitude, encouraging introspection and a deeper connection to my inner self. Together, these works have fostered an appreciation for both the external beauty of nature and the internal landscapes of thought and feeling. Art appreciation, as a form of consciousness-raising practice, has enhanced my awareness on multiple levels. It has helped me better understand my emotional responses and the ways I find meaning in contrasting themes such as vastness and isolation. It also fosters empathy by encouraging recognition that others may interpret and connect with the same works in very different ways. Environmentally, Bierstadt's painting reinforces the importance of preserving natural landscapes, while Hopper's work highlights the subtle relationship between human-made spaces and the natural world.

In conclusion, visiting the Yale University Art Gallery was both an educational and grounding experience that connected me more deeply to art, history, and culture. By reflecting on works such as Hopper's *Rooms by the Sea* and Bierstadt's *Yosemite Valley*, *Glacier Point Trail*, I developed a greater appreciation for both the natural world and the complexities of human emotion, while also becoming more intentionally mindful and present during the experience.

The Ethics of Seeing: Art, Exploitation, and the Reconstruction of Memory

Jahmai Scarlett

My two visits to the Yale University Art Gallery opened my eyes to the profound ways in which art functions as a repository of history, a mirror of society, and a catalyst for personal growth. During these visits, I immersed myself in works ranging from ancient Roman sculptures to contemporary pieces. In this essay, I recount my experiences at the gallery, examine two significant artworks that engage with themes of injustice and resistance, and reflect on how these encounters inspired changes in my personal outlook and everyday life. When I first entered the gallery, I was immediately struck by the way artworks from different civilizations, including Roman, Asian, African, and American cultures, spoke to the universality of human experience. Each exhibit felt like a time capsule, capturing the visions, beliefs, and struggles of both its creators and the societies from which it emerged. For example, the ancient Roman sculptures and classical paintings conveyed a strong sense of order, balance, and idealism, reflecting the cultural values of their era. In contrast, works created in societies shaped by conflict and upheaval carried the emotional weight of turbulent histories and demonstrated remarkable resilience.

A particularly memorable moment during one of my visits was a long discussion I had with a knowledgeable friend. Their insights into the historical background and technical details of specific works provided a level of understanding that extended far beyond the visual beauty of the pieces themselves. One conversation focused on a Roman relief depicting scenes of civic life. Initially, I had admired its intricate craftsmanship, but through our discussion, I came to understand the political and social values it represented. That exchange helped me realize that artworks are not only aesthetic objects, but also historical documents that challenge us to reflect on our own identities, cultures, and origins.



Titus Kaphar, *Another fight for remembrance*, 2015

Among the many works that resonated with me, one captured my attention most powerfully. The painting employs a black-and-white palette, interrupted only by a small yet striking splash of color. This deliberate contrast creates a visual metaphor for the selective nature of historical memory. The monochromatic background symbolizes how complex and painful struggles are often reduced to

simplified narratives, where only certain aspects of history are remembered. In contrast, the isolated element of color draws the viewer's attention to the personal and specific experiences woven into collective history.

As I reflected on the piece, I understood that the struggle against discrimination and exploitation spans generations and remains unresolved. At the same time, I felt a sense of hope when considering how the efforts and sacrifices of those who endured even harsher conflicts helped lay the foundation for the progress we witness today. The realization that difficult struggles of the past can lead to meaningful change reinforced my belief that resilience, even in the face of overwhelming challenges, has the power to create lasting improvement.

My own experiences with law enforcement have led me to question the use of power and authority. When I look at this piece, I do not only see echoes of historical protests; I also see reflections of contemporary struggles over truth, justice, and representation. The painting suggests that narratives within our collective memory are often manipulated unless they are preserved through recorded visual or audio evidence. In today's digital era, where images and recordings can easily be altered or misrepresented, I find myself questioning the authenticity of the narratives we are presented with. The work challenges viewers to examine historical records critically and to honor the truth behind each story.

In contrast to Kaphar's vivid portrayal of protest, *The Maid's Room, in the Backyard of a Suburban House* depicts an orderly yet confined domestic space that reflects how modern society has been shaped by layers of historical injustice. Standing before this piece, I was immediately struck by the room's neatness and its sense of spatial restriction. These qualities function as a metaphor for the social and economic limitations imposed on marginalized individuals, revealing how systems of inequality can remain embedded within everyday spaces.



David Goldblatt, *The maid's room,* Johannesburg, Transvaal (Gauteng), 1969/2024

Although I benefit from systems that have developed out of historical exploitation, I also feel unsettled by the disconnect between modern comforts and their often violent origins. Goldblatt's depiction of a meticulously arranged domestic space is not meant to celebrate prosperity; rather, it serves as a reminder that many conveniences taken for granted today are deeply connected to enduring histories of inequality and injustice. The artwork calls on viewers to recognize that, unless these

historical wrongs are actively acknowledged and challenged, their effects will continue to shape future generations.

The emotional impact of these artworks was both intense and complex. In *Another Fight for Remembrance*, I encountered a profound sense of pain stemming from the realization that the struggle against injustice is ongoing and deeply rooted in history. At the same time, this sorrow was balanced by hope inspired by the sacrifices and resilience of those who fought before us. The coexistence of pain and hope within my response to the painting emphasized the enduring possibility of progress, even in the face of persistent struggle. The emotions evoked by this piece extended beyond an immediate reaction; they encouraged deeper reflection on the structures of society and the inequalities woven into its foundation. These powerful feelings reinforced the idea that while many of us benefit from modern systems and comforts, we also carry a responsibility to confront and question the injustices that continue to sustain them.

The symbolic use of a monochromatic palette in *Another Fight for Remembrance* encouraged me to view history as a narrative often reduced to simplified visual codes. In earlier periods, when visual and audio methods were limited forms of documentation, historical records depended on static images and written accounts. Today, with digital technology allowing images, videos, and recordings to be constantly edited and manipulated, the reliability of historical records has become even more uncertain. The artwork makes clear that history, much like the images used to represent it, can be shaped to serve particular agendas. This realization prompted me to critically reexamine the narratives we often accept as truth. Similarly, the portrayal of a confined yet orderly domestic space in *The Maid's Room* raises important questions about the foundations of modern society. Reflecting on the work led me to recognize that genuine progress requires us to actively confront and dismantle the lingering effects of historical injustice that continue to shape contemporary life.

Both artworks encouraged me to think deeply about how collective memory is constructed. In *Another Fight for Remembrance*, the restrained use of color against a monochromatic background challenged me to consider the selective nature of memory and representation. I began to see history as a collection of carefully curated fragments, where certain narratives are preserved while others are marginalized or forgotten. In today's world, where visual and audio recordings can easily be altered, I have become increasingly concerned about the long-term reliability of the historical record. This concern has made me more aware of the importance of critically examining the sources through which we understand history. In a similar vein, the depiction of domestic order in *The Maid's Room* compelled me to question the very foundations of modern living. The carefully arranged space, while outwardly calm and appealing, serves as a reminder that many aspects of modern comfort and prosperity are rooted in systems of inequality. The work suggests that eradicating even the most subtle forms of exploitation require us to examine intentionally the structures that continue to sustain them. The insights I gained from the piece led me to recognize that confronting these systems is not merely an option, but a responsibility.

The conversations I had with friends after my museum visits also played a significant role in deepening my understanding of these issues. Rather than simply sharing my thoughts online, we met in person for thoughtful and extended discussions about how modern life is intertwined with histories of exploitation and inequality. Our conversations centered on the idea that many of the comforts we enjoy today are built upon foundations shaped by past injustices. We debated the ethical implications of

benefiting from such systems and considered ways to reduce our own complicity while still functioning within society.

These discussions have had a lasting impact on the way I approach my own habits and decisions. They made me more conscious of my personal responsibility regarding ethical consumption and social awareness. I now try to view purchases and everyday choices through a more critical lens, questioning whether my actions contribute to systems of injustice or support a more equitable society. Although I have not yet participated directly in community initiatives, these conversations encouraged me to adopt a more thoughtful and intentional approach to daily living. The awareness I gained now guides my decisions not only through practicality, but also through a growing commitment to challenge injustice wherever possible.

Reflecting on my experiences at the Yale University Art Gallery has affirmed my belief that art is a powerful means of communication and self-discovery. Art possesses a unique ability to cross cultural and historical boundaries, offering insight into how people throughout history have documented both their triumphs and their tragedies. Both *Another Fight for Remembrance* and *The Maid's Room* deepened my awareness of historical injustice and inspired me to think more critically about my role within contemporary society. This experience has also led me to make a personal commitment. I strive to be more thoughtful and critical in my daily choices and to engage actively in conversations that challenge the assumptions and practices embedded within modern culture. My commitment is clear: I want my personal habits to reflect an awareness of exploitation, inequality, and the need for meaningful social change. In my view, art should not only inspire reflection, but also encourage tangible and responsible action in everyday life.

In conclusion, my time at the Yale University Art Gallery taught me that art is far more than an expression of beauty. It is a living document that challenges us to confront uncomfortable truths about history, inequality, and exploitation. The emotions these works evoked—pain, hope, sadness, and anger—became deeply intertwined with my reflections and conversations, reshaping the way I think about my consumption habits and my broader worldview. With this new awareness, I leave the gallery with a renewed commitment to examining my daily choices and remaining actively engaged in thoughtful discussions about justice, history, and social responsibility. Art opened a window into the hidden realities behind many of the comforts of modern life and inspired me to question the systems that continue to sustain exploitation. As I continue forward, I hope that this heightened awareness will guide me toward contributing to a more just, ethical, and sustainable future.

Art as Experience: Understanding Life Through Visual Expression

Shafia Syed

Visiting the Yale University Art Gallery was a meaningful and eye-opening experience. The space itself is beautiful, and each room offered something unique—a blend of history and creativity that encouraged me to see the world from new perspectives. One of the aspects that stood out to me most was how every piece extended beyond its surface appearance. Whether it was a painting or a sculpture, I found myself thinking about the artist's life, the historical context in which the work was created, and the emotions or ideas the artist may have been trying to express. Through this experience, I began to see art as more than something simply meant to be observed. Art captures moments, emotions, and stories that continue to resonate long after the work itself was created. It made me realize how much history, culture, and human experience can be contained within a single piece.

I also reflected on how differently people may interpret the same artwork. That, to me, is one of the most powerful aspects of art. Although everyone encounters the same piece, each person connects with it in a unique and personal way. One of the most important lessons I took from this experience is that art is not only something we see—it is something we feel. It has the ability to connect us to deeper emotions, thoughts, and understandings of ourselves and the world around us.



Jean-François Millet, *Starry Night*, c.1850-65

The first artwork that drew my attention was created by the French artist Jean-François Millet during the mid-19th century. What captivated me most about the painting was its depiction of the night sky, which transcended time by remaining constant for all people, regardless of the century in which they live. This idea felt comforting and reminded me of how deeply connected human beings are, no matter where we come from. The painting evoked a sense of calm and reassurance, offering the quiet feeling that despite life's changes and challenges, the night sky will always remain something familiar to look toward. I was immediately struck by the artist's portrayal of the sky. It was not simply the stars or the movement of the wind that captured my attention, but rather the vastness of the scene and the timelessness it conveyed. The work made me realize that nature is one of the few things that connects all people across time and place. In this painting, the night sky felt universal, something shared

collectively by humanity. This realization deepened my appreciation for the natural world and reminded me of the importance of protecting an environment that belongs to all of us.



Pablo Picasso, *First Steps*, 1943

The second piece of art I chose is *First Steps* by Pablo Picasso, an oil painting created in 1943. What truly captivated me about this piece was the mother's expression. Her tiredness struck me deeply, reminding me of the quiet sacrifices mothers make in their everyday lives. It brought me back to my own mother, who raised me and my siblings on her own, since my father was the sole earner. Seeing the mother's expression in the painting made me reflect on the quiet strength and resilience my own mother has embodied throughout my life, and it gave me a renewed sense of appreciation for her. The work serves as a powerful reminder of the unseen effort involved in raising a family, and the depth of love and labor it requires.

In the painting, a mother guides her child as the child takes their first steps. However, it is not only about the literal act of walking: it is about growth, development, and transition. As humans, we are constantly evolving, just as nature is always changing, growing, and renewing itself. The mother's exhausted yet caring expression made me think about how nature, too, requires patience and endurance. In the natural world, there are seasons of growth, rest, and struggle, and these cycles are essential for continued life. This led me to reflect on how much effort is required for humans, animals, and the environment to continue functioning and evolving. Each plays a role within an interconnected system. At times, this process is exhausting, yet it is also necessary. The idea of growth through fatigue, of continuing forward despite exhaustion, feels like a natural process shared across life itself. In many ways, our lives, whether we recognize it or not, mirror the same cycles and rhythms we observe in nature.

I selected these two paintings not only for their visual beauty, but also for how they encouraged me to reflect on our relationship with the world around us. When I first looked at *Starry Night*, I felt an overwhelming sense of peace. There is something deeply calming about the way the sky is depicted. It feels like a reminder that, regardless of the chaos or stress we experience in daily life, there is always something constant and grounding to return to. The night sky felt like a form of sanctuary, offering a sense of relief, as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. It reminded me that the sky remains unchanged despite life's uncertainties, and that I should sometimes pause to appreciate the constancy of

nature. That feeling of peace was deeply emotional and reassuring, as though everything in the world was, for a moment, okay. In contrast, my emotional response to *First Steps* was different but equally powerful. The mother's tired expression made me reflect on the strength and love that often goes unrecognized, especially in those who care for others while carrying emotional and physical exhaustion. The painting encouraged me to consider how easily we overlook the sacrifices people make for us, and how important it is to acknowledge and appreciate them.

Looking at *Starry Night*, my mind turned to the idea of permanence versus impermanence. The stars in the sky, the swirling clouds, and the small village below felt like a frozen moment in time. At the same time, the painting also felt like a fragment of something far larger—something that has existed for centuries and will continue long after we are gone. That contrast struck me deeply. It made me reflect on how, in our daily lives, we often focus on what feels temporary: our problems, our stress, and even our personal growth. Yet the stars remain constant. They have been shining long before we arrived and will continue to shine long after we leave.

First Steps, on the other hand, led me to think about growth as a process, both physical and emotional. It is not simply about a child learning to walk; it is about the challenges, uncertainty, and effort involved in taking first steps into something new. It made me reflect on how everyone experiences this process in different forms—whether learning a new skill, entering a new stage of life, or facing something difficult for the first time. The mother's tired expression and the child's hopeful movement together helped me understand the cycle of life more deeply. It is not only about reaching a destination, but about the journey itself and everything it demands along the way.

After visiting the museum, I found myself thinking repeatedly about these two paintings. I discussed both *Starry Night* and *First Steps* with my friends, sharing how *Starry Night* gave me a sense of peace and connection to something greater than myself. It reminded me that, no matter what happens in life, there are constant elements in the universe that can offer comfort and perspective. With *First Steps*, I found myself speaking about my mother and feeling a renewed appreciation for everything she has done for me and my siblings. I recommend both works to friends and family, especially for those interested in art that reflects the deeper emotions and experiences we all share.

About the Editors



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