

Fusing Romantic Landscape Painting and Abstract Surrealism: An Interview with Hannah K. Freeman

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Drawing on the romantic landscape tradition blended with abstract surrealism, [Hannah K. Freeman](#) creates artwork inspired by ecotheology and nature. One of her larger pieces, *Survival*, is on display in the lobby of the Center for Theology, Science, and Human Flourishing.

Laura Donnelly (LD): My first question is about your background, and what brought you to this intersection of nature, theology, and art?



Hannah Freeman (HF): The way I was brought up – on a ranch, in the country, with deep ties to the land and the natural processes present within the land (the process of birth, life, growth, death, and decay). From a young age, I was cognizant that death was a fact of life – an intricate and necessary part of the process, and I recognized the good that could come out of it too. I was also aware that something was out there that was bigger than myself. I later learned about God and began to understand my relationship with Christ. That was the beginning of my contemplative process of using the finite to understand the infinite. My paintings became my mode of expressing the wondrous and mysterious celebration of existence and everything that is wrapped up in it.

LD: Did growing up on a ranch and your connection to nature, spirituality, and creation inspire you to become an artist?

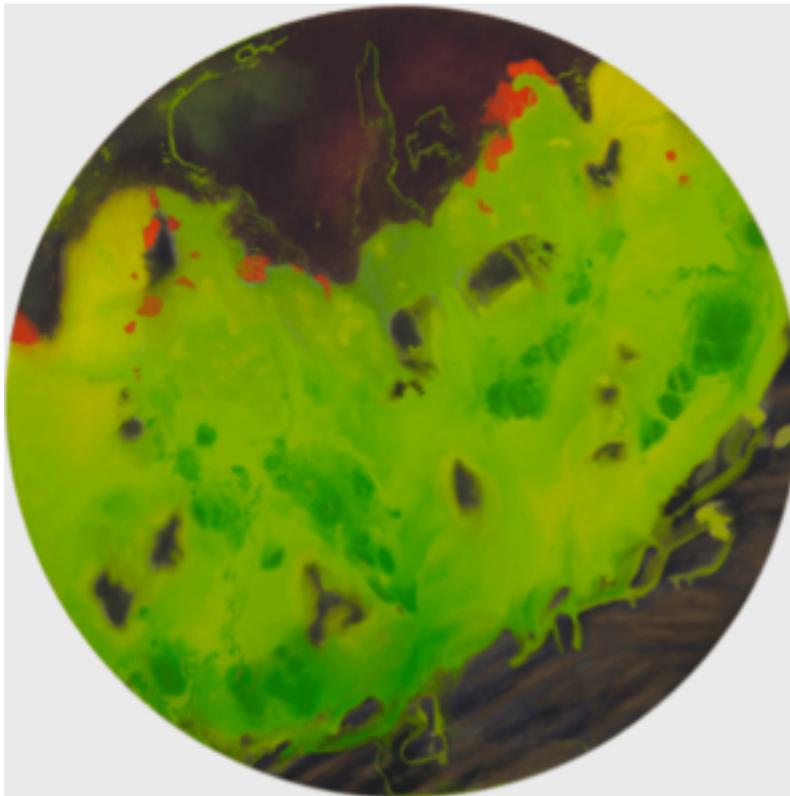
HF: Well, I was always crafty. As soon as I could hold a pencil, I drew all over everything (much to my mom's delight) – couches, Kleenex boxes, and walls. At home, I still find random things (pencil sharpeners, erasers, toys) that I wrote on 20 years ago. Growing up, I was interested in different

things – gymnastics, volleyball, 4H (showing horses and cattle, and art!) – so I do not remember ever being conscious of wanting to be an artist, but I know that I did always hang out in my room doing crafty things. I also remember being the go-to if anything arty came up in school, or outside of school.

LD: From where do you draw inspiration when you are creating a new piece of art?

HF: It is important to me to create art that speaks to something I am passionate about and to focus on what makes me who I am – whatever is at the heart of my spirit and soul. By drawing my inspiration from within, I will paint something that is different (on some level) than anyone else, and something that is real, that is true to me and who I am and what I believe in. I want to make paintings that can serve some kind of purpose, that can speak to all people, no matter what their beliefs. For me, it made the most sense to make paintings of the natural world rooted in creation. My commitment to ecotheology inspires me to communicate spiritual ideas in relation to creation by focusing on natural systems, like lichen and fungi. I figure that if I share my experiences in creation that connect me with my spirituality, it might help others do the same, or at least bring attention to their own relationships with themselves and with the rest of the world.

LD: Are there any artists that you draw upon for inspiration when creating paintings about the natural world and creation?



HF: My work combines the sublime (divine ideas behind romantic landscape paintings that depict mountains, valleys, and forests that are both beautiful and terrifying) with abstraction and surrealism that have a somewhat dreamy and dreary quality. Caspar David Friedrich's nineteenth-century

landscape paintings are soaked with deep religious and spiritual imagery and significance. When you combine that with Wassily Kandinsky, one of the pioneers of abstraction who placed an emphasis on the visual aspects of the spiritual, and with the contemplative color fields of Mark Rothko, the results are fascinating. My intention is that this synthesis of techniques and references to creation will invite you in; while the abstraction will challenge you to perceive the piece in a way that goes beyond the surface to explore your own thoughts and beliefs.

LD: How do your works evolve? Do you have a clear vision when you begin painting or does it emerge over time?

HF: Generally, ideas emerge over time, sometimes years. I am constantly thinking about painting and many times I think, "Okay, interesting idea, I'm going to do it. I'm just not ready for it yet." Then, two years later, I do it. As I mentioned earlier, my recent artwork is rooted in my experiences in creation, observing lichen, fungi, and moss. I take tons of photos when I am out adventuring and refer back to them later, if needed. For each painting, I reflect on what I have seen when out hiking and think about how to capture the essence of that experience through the painting itself. At the moment, I begin with a process that generally does not lend itself well to planning: I start each painting with paint pours that are hard to predict. Even so, I usually have some sort of plan, even if 10 seconds later that plan fails and I have to go to Plan B.

LD: I have to ask - what is a paint pour? And can you tell me more about your method and process of creating?

HF: Good question! It is the mechanism I use to begin to capture the essence of the organism or experience that I am using as inspiration. I basically mix oil paint, Galkyd (an alkyd oil painting medium) and mineral spirits together, and then I pour the substance onto my surface, which is a maple wood panel. Through a process of trial and error, I see what combinations blend together to achieve the certain essence, color, or tone that I am trying to capture for each painting. There are times when the paint itself is too opaque or translucent, so I have to routinely adjust the method and process to create different results. I imagine it to be somewhat similar to how scientists begin their experiments - in anticipation of the results! I also work back into the color fields to add representational elements that specifically reference the organism I am capturing.



LD: If you had to point to one thing, what would you say is the crux of your art?

HF: I want to create paintings that make viewers think beyond the work itself – to consider their relationship to the painting and to begin to understand what is depicted in the painting. At the end of the day, I hope my work provides a space for viewers to reflect and engage in contemplation. Ideally, the contemplation would lead people to reflect on how they are connected to themselves, their own spirit and soul, creation (the outdoors), and the rest of the world.

LD: Lastly, tell us a little bit about the class you are teaching at Notre Dame.

HF: As a graduate student in the Department of Art, Art History and Design, I teach one Drawing I class. The class covers the fundamentals of drawing – from gesture drawing, contour line drawing, and value drawing, to a photo-based drawing and an artist-inspired project. We end the semester with a final project that requires students to come up with their own project proposals. In doing so, students are able to really investigate their own ideas and desires. Students at the University of Notre

Dame come from all different backgrounds and have all kinds of interests. With the final project, it is fun to help students visualize and realize their own ideas, whether it is something as complex as visualizing mathematical theorems or something simpler like a nostalgic family portrait.

Hannah Freeman is an M.F.A. candidate in Painting in the Department of Art, Art History and Design at the University of Notre Dame. She completed her undergraduate and Master of Arts training in Graphic Design and Studio Art, specializing in painting, from Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois. Hannah's artwork is also currently featured in the Graduate School in the Main Building at the University of Notre Dame and in the Duncan Student Center on the west side of the stadium.