*Painting Deep Time: Encountering Landforms’ Alterity and Phusis Through Phenomenology and Oil Painting*

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# Abstract

The practice of oil painting landforms, rocks and sea water in Jervis Inlet, British Columbia (BC) puts me in dialogue with land’s resistant alterity. By closely attuning to landforms, and by stepping back and blurring my focus at regular intervals while practicing oil painting of landforms, I experience *phusis* of land and of my painting. Through self-concealment and emergence, land alternates between revealing and enfolding its character, resisting my human comprehension but speaking to more-than-human elements in myself. The slow accretive process of oil painting lends itself to phenomenological research, taking days and weeks for paint to dry before new layers can be applied. This slowness produces *phusis* within me as an artist, as I am forced to withdraw from the painting while its layers dry and we reassume an unfamiliarity with one another as dual subjects. Through oil painting, landforms’ alterity shifts towards familiarity. Earth’s elements originate in deep time, pre-dating human experience. Cycling within me is a repository of minerals, water, and salinity originating in deep time. This draws attention to alterity within my own body. By practicing phenomenological research through painting landforms, I encounter the phenomenological paradox of deep time and come face-to-face with the originary elemental origin I share with landforms.

***Keywords:*** alterity, oil painting, phenomenology, landforms, *phusis*, slow

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Phenomenology places primacy on first-hand lived experience of a human subject observer (van Manen, 2016; Roth, 2015; Himanka, 2005). Deep time refers to time anterior to human existence and therefore anterior to the first-hand lived experience on which phenomenology depends. Earthen landforms, minerals and elements emerged in deep time, predating human existence and a human subject observer. Geomateriality and minerality confront the human observer as radically other than human, stemming largely from their origin in the depth of time outside human experience. For some phenomenologists, the idea of time anterior to human existence presents a paradox, because there is no direct human experience that captures these moments. How can deep time be known, if we know things only through our senses? Some phenomenological and Indigenous writers describe earth’s alterity from humans as more-than-

human (MTH). Landforms’ anterior emergence confounds direct phenomenological observation and presents us with this paradox. The only way to confront this paradox is through our senses. We get a feeling for earth’s alterity and anteriority through our senses upon which phenomenological research depends. Our senses reveal that the earth *has* and *had its own life* before humans arrived. The slow accretive practice of oil painting, or *techne* in Heideggerian (Sobchack, 2006) terms, provides an encounter with landforms’ alterity, *phusis* and embeddedness in deep time. Carefully attuning to landforms while painting, I experience *phusis,* geomaterial alterity and embeddedness in deep time within my own self.

## Structure of the Paper

In this paper, I elaborate on the concepts of *phusis* and *techne*, broadly understood in Heideggerian (Sobchack, 2006) terms as nature and creativity respectively. These concepts inform the next section which describes my practice of oil painting landforms. I will bring *phusis* together with geomateriality, deep time and *techne*, and my artistic practice. I present a detailed description of my oil painting practice, how I engage in moment-to-moment and pre-reflective thoughts. I share my experience of *phusis* of the painting as it takes shape. By allowing the painting to emerge and to come toward me, it tells me what to do, if anything. The painting’s emergence toward me is a tangible encounter with *phusis,* the ongoing process in the nature, or what I call the MTH world*.* This supports Heidegger’s (Sobchack, 2006) contention that *techne*, the human creation of art, is an extension or imitation of *phusis*.

After a full description of my artistic experience painting the work titled *Cove* 2018 (see Figure 1 below),

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| **Figure 1.** *Cove* (2018) oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches. Painting by author. |

I touch lightly upon an ongoing debate begun in 1951 within the phenomenological community about the paradox of deep time, specifically around whether it is possible to understand time anterior to human existence. This ontic debate relates to my prolonged encounter with deep time while engaged in the artistic practice of oil painting geomaterial landforms.

Floating in a kayak while gazing and photographing landforms, I situate myself in the particular context of the sea in British Columbia (BC), which moves in relation to land. Through this phenomenological experience, I challenge both Husserl’s (Himanka, 2005) assertion of an unmoving stable earth and the Copernican view of an earth that revolves around the sun. There is no theory that can deny the sensation of floating on sea water while land’s horizon changes. I consider the potential compatibility between Husserl’s and relational ontologies that view the earth is our *only* reference point for human experience and sustenance.

# Phusis and techne

*Phusis* and *techne* are important concepts in phenomenology, as they relate to Heidegger’s views on nature, art and the human compulsion to create. Heidegger uses the term *phusis,* the ancient Greek notion of nature, sometimes spelled “*physis*”(Sobchack, 2006, p. 337), to describe the earth’s ongoing process of emergence and concealment, as demonstrated in the opening of a bud (emergence) or in the sheltering of a plant’s roots in the ground (self-concealment). Heidegger does not restrict *phusis* to the natural or the MTH world. *Phusis* is expressed in the organic emergence and withdrawal of all earthen things, including the spontaneous emergence and concealment within humans, such as “the unsolicited emergence of a kindly smile” (Foltz, 1995, p. 127). Heidegger (as cited in Sobchack, 2006, p. 347), perceived human creativity, the making, innovation and doing we associate with art, innovation, making things, and industry, as an imitation of earthen *phusis*. He called this human activity *techne*, “an emulation of the inaugural and grounding power of *physis* (sic): ‘the arising of something from out of itself’” (Heidegger as cited in Sobchack, 2006, p. 347). Heidegger’s notion of *techne* encompasses making fine art as in my oil painting practice described below. *Techne*, the making of art, and the bringing forth of oil paintings that celebrate landforms, is where my oil painting practice intersects with phenomenological research. Sobchack aligns with Heidegger’s view of *techne*, that the “bringing forth” (as cited in Sobchack, 2006, p. 347) of the world by artwork as in an oil painting, is an extension of the broader and ongoing process of *phusis*. In the following section, I explore the distributed subjecthood of the cove which compels me to paint, to *phusis* within the cove, my painting and self. This exploration is grounded in a full phenomenological moment-to-moment description of my process and practice of oil painting. I describe moments where I experience the dissolving of boundary between myself, the painting and the landform, when we come toward each other, co-arising through Heidegger’s notion of *phusis.*

# The Phenomenological Practice of Painting Cove

Through slow accretive practice of oil painting, I practice *techne* and experience *phusis* and alterity of landforms first hand. While emplaced in the cove, the boundary between me and the landform dissolves. My ontology rejects the subject/object binary and shifts towards Abram’s (2010, 1997) notion of sentient earth. This ontology includes decentering the human and distributed subjecthood among the MTH world. Relational ontologies, including Indigenous (Hatcher et al., 2009; Kimmerer, 2013; Watts, 2013), animist (Stuckey, 2010) and speculative feminist worldviews reveal that Husserl’s (Himanka, 2005) insistence on the earth as the basis of all lived human experience and sustenance is not new but has been recognized by thousands of years of Indigenous ontologies. In the process of painting Cove (see Figure 1), I encounter MTH aqueous earthen mineral alterity in myself (Neimanis, 2019). Figure 1 shows an oil painting of a dark cove in Jervis Inlet, BC where over 37 years, I have experienced the land’s subtle *slow* emergence. I spend hours drifting here in my kayak. Attuning to this place brings me into contact with the cove’s geomateriality and emergent spirit. For my painting practice, I rely on three color photographs taken from my kayak, and on my sensory experiences here.

## Being Called to Paint by Land

Choosing a subject to paint is a reflexive dialogical process, involving distributed subjecthood and agency between myself and the MTH world. When I feel myself drawn to paint a particular landform as in the cove in Figure 1, it actively summons me. It emerges toward me, and I meet it halfway or somewhere in between. We are relating to one another. As a practicing artist, my experience of *phusis* stems from my relational ontology; I perceive landforms and water as agents that choose me as much as I choose them. Abram (2010) gives a phenomenological description of Vincent van Gogh’s relation to land and the MTH world as depicted in his vibrant paintings:

there is nothing that is not alive. There is no point in the light-filled plenum of sky that does not have its own temporal dynamism, its own rhythm, its pulse the landscape breathes. And each presence, each clump of soil, each stone and stalk of wheat is in vibrant dialogue with beings around it. (p. 50)

## Phusis is why painters prefer northern light.

## In Jervis Inlet, I drift offshore in my small red kayak. The air is warm. A rock wall looms over the dark cove, no ripples on the water. My boat and body feel stable. I take three photographs to guide my early painting of this cove. Behind me on the illuminated eastern shore, the relentless sun punishes the rocks, making the land weary, lethargic, and restless, like a fever. Direct southern light stretches the contrast between brightness and shadow, drawing attention away from landforms’ subtle nature. Under the sun’s open stare, rocks squint and crouch, flinging brilliant versions of themselves outward. This makes their hidden natures difficult for artists and poets to discern. This is why painters prefer northern light.

In diffuse northern light, landforms unfold to become *unguarded,* emerging quietly, generously. Their quiet hidden nature comes to the surface and they reveal themselves as porous sentient MTH beings, as I too am a porous breathing body drifting offshore in my kayak. Merleau-Ponty calls the earth’s concealment of itself the “other side of things” (Toadvine, 2019, p. 152). Heidegger (Sobchack, 2006) calls it *phusis*. Moist forest smells drift over the sea water, carried on an air current flowing down a small stream, its sensuous trickle invisible beneath the rocks. *Phusis* is slow here: this cliff, these lichens, dark shadows, the leaning tree which leans a little further to the left each year. I hear, feel, smell, and see the cove’s sentient presence speaking and coming towards me. We’re in contact: the rocks, lichen, overhanging Douglas fir tree, and me. I am mineral, salt, air, humus, animal, aqueous and saline. My blood is saline like the salt water upon which I drift. My body contains all the elements in this cove (Figure 1) and comes from the same deep time, the same crashing explosion, from which the minerals in this rock wall and the pigments in my paints come, co-arising together from deep time. One day my body will die. The minerals and salts of my body will endure past my organic life into the future, as deep as the immemorial past.

## Setting up my Painting Workspace

I choose a high quality 20 x 24 inch stretched canvas upon which to paint my cove, where brilliant green and yellow lichens creep in slow time across the cliff’s mineral surface. I prop my drum-like canvas upon my easel’s shelf and step back to gauge its height relative to mine. I raise the shelf so that when I begin painting, moving and sweeping my arm across the space between and the canvas, my arm will cross in front of my chest, rather than my lower rib cage, which would be too low for optimal control of my brush. Oil painting requires me to orient my body to the body of the painting itself. As in conversation with a person, we will be talking with one another and need to perceive each other at equal height, not one above the other. Having observed the cove for nine consecutive days in July and studied my color photos of the cove, I feel a low abdominal pull towards this painting that I am about to begin. It feels like we have been travelling towards each other for the 37 years I have been paddling here.

I open my roll of tinfoil and tear a piece to wrap around my wooden palette, taping the edges to its underside. To create a suitable surface so I do not need to think when reaching for my brushes and paints, I carefully stack layers of my father’s thick zoology textbooks on the table beside me, covering them with cardboard to protect them from paint. I want this surface to be just below the height of my right elbow and close to my right side. I need to be able to turn and move without thinking. Just natural, spontaneous, pre-reflective movement that does not get in the way of painting and which does not burn up energy with thinking. Upon this new surface, I place my palette, two clean empty tuna cans for solvent, a dry clean rag torn from an old bed sheet, a liter of odorless solvent, a large coffee can contain my 40 paint brushes, a large fishing tackle box containing kilos of oil paint, and a tall plastic cup of cold drinking water. I choose one photo to work with, the small blurry one the still leaves lots of room for interpretation of the cove’s privacy, concealment, and *phusis.* I tape this small photo to the upright beam of my easel.

## Painting the Under Layer

I still my breath and look at the blurry photograph. The cove’s dark heart pulses within the photo’s blurry shapes. I choose French ultramarine blue, my go-to color for painting under layers of dark moody places that speak in the lowest register. I uncap the tube; oily glistening pigment hovers inside the tube’s mouth. I squeeze a generous blob onto my palette and carefully twist the cap back. I open my bottle of solvent and pour half a cup into each tuna can, cans I have collected over the last three months for this purpose. When does a painting start? Does it begin with a tuna sandwich, when I open a can of tuna, scoop out the meat and clean the can, saving it for my painting practice? Maybe. I choose a size eight filbert brush with a rounded tip and dip this lightly into the solvent, dabbing the brush tip onto the rag to remove excess solvent. Touching the edge of French ultramarine pigment, draw it outward from the blob, washing a light blue stain over the tinfoil surface of my palette. I add more solvent to this to dilute it until it feels like the right intensity for the first layer, the under layer, of the painting. This foundational color determines the mood of the painting even when it is covered up with other layers of paint. I lift my brush to the bright white canvas and touch its tip to the top left area of the pristine surface. Brilliant dark blue dribbles down its surface. I sweep my hand to the right and drag paint across the canvas. More blue solvent dribbles down. I dip my brush into the pigment on my palette and repeat this motion, until the vertical surface is covered in stunning French ultramarine, my favorite color, the color of the other side of night.

I step back and observe my stretched blue canvas drum. This professional quality canvas has an interior frame around which the canvas is wrapped and attached under the rim. I paint around all four side of this three-dimensional canvas, and cover the back edges as well. I will extend the painting around the edges, no boundary or frame needed to enclose this cove; just limitless horizon on all sides wrapping back on itself. This wrap-around effect is a bonus for a potential buyer, as there is no frame required; framing an oil painting is expensive.

The entire surface is wet now with diluted translucent blue paint. I must wait for this surface to dry before going any further. I gently press the tip of my filbert brush into my dry clean rag and drag residual paint off the natural boar hair bristles before swirling it around in the solvent which turns a shocking intense blue. I dab the brush off and gently wash it with a new cake Sunlight Soap, enjoying the friction afforded by the letters S-U-N-L-I-G-H-T on the bar’s surface against the bristles. Once no more pigment appears on my left palm, I pinch the bristles to remove excess water and place the brush upright in the can with my other brushes. I’m eager to continue this painting but this needs to dry before anything else happens. I lie the canvas face up on the deck where it lies exposed to the sun’s dry- baking heat. When I go inside for dinner, before dew accumulates on its surface, I prop the canvas vertically against the outside wall of my cabin. I look across St. Vincent Bay, BC and discern the cove’s dark cleft one nautical mile away.

## Sketching the Main Components

The following day, I touch the canvas’ brilliant blue surface. It’s dry. This is good, it means I can paint over yesterday’s color. It’s time to sketch the gesture of the cove in a light translucent color that won’t clash against colors to follow. I choose raw Sienna and squeeze a blob onto my palette. The pigment is dry, lacking adequate linseed oil medium that manufactures add to pigment to make them buttery and easy to work with. I uncap my small bottle of linseed oil, a gift from my director at work, and dip the tip of my small palette knife into the oil. I hover the oily tip over my dry blob of raw Sienna paint to allow four glistening drops fall. I mash the oil into pigment, folding it over until it is mixed consistently. I choose a number four size brush with a soft synthetic tip and dip this into my solvent, dabbing it onto my rag. I dab the brush into the raw Sienna and twist my brush around in a circle on the palette’s surface. This sketch is another foundational step in the painting’s creation. It forms the movement and main proportions within the painting. It is important to go slowly here, to take my time and not rush, even though I am eager to get into the sumptuous earthen colors in this picture. I will sketch the outline of the cliff, rocks, water, and the curving Douglas fir tree, which will form the main components of the painting. These sketch lines will be eventually be covered but they provide an early map of what to do next. The first line is the water. I hear the voice of my painting teacher, Ursula, who passed away in 2018 but remains actively present in my painting practice. She says, “nothing’s centered in nature, there’s no symmetry. Go for thirds.”

I drag the brush across the bottom third of the canvas. The painting assumes a shape with this line, a declaration where water meets land. After I sketch the cliff in, I may need to shift this line up or down. I study the photograph and soften my focus. The photo is blurry, but I need to blur it more in order to escape from reading it too literally. I see that the cliff *is* the painting. The cliff has to be right, and cannot be symmetrical. It needs to declare itself here in the painting as it declares itself on the water. I draw my hand up and place the tip of the brush at the top of the canvas, slightly to the left of center and sketch the cliff’s outline without thinking. I cannot think this; I need to feel it or it will be wrong. The heavy upper stone chunk sweeps briefly towards the middle of the canvas and then tapers back towards the left of the picture, pinch a waist near its middle but not in the exact middle. Under this colossal overhang, a brief gap of space appears, where soft feathery vegetation grows atop a cushion of moss. This is the heart of the painting, this impossible gap. I must afford enough space here for the growth of the wild grass, which leans under its own weight in the photo. This is going to need extra room to express itself. I sketch the outline of boulders beneath this gap and then step back from the painting. I remember my oath made years ago, to keep my painting fresh and avoid overpainting: “Step back from the work sooner, step back often. Stop painting sooner.”

Oil painting is about *not* overthinking, *not* overworking or worrying about “getting it right.” The act of painting is about allowing the painting to talk and say what needs to be done. Overpainting details or using too many colors diminishes a painting’s power, its intensity, its presence. Less is more. I step back and regard the early sketch. I take more steps back so that I can see and feel from a distance what is happening in terms of proportion and scale. No. The gap is too small. There is not enough room to show off the bending grass. I approach my work table and dip a corner of my rag into the solvent and wipe the lower half of my sketched cliff off. I dry the surface with my rag. I slow my breath and look at the blurry photograph. Here. Right here is the heart, this gap. Make it larger, give it space to breathe.

I loosen my body and I do another loose sketch. This time when I step back, it is right. I carry on sketching loose lines, drawing the sweep of the leaning tree, the rocks gossiping at the water’s edge, and the colossal chunks of rock and moss composing the surface of the cliff. Once I have got the main shapes of the painting sketched in, I take a break. This sketch is the most critical, one level higher than the need to stop painting before it becomes overworked with detail and discursive thought. I will come back to this tomorrow. I lie the canvas face-up again to dry on the deck. I need to be away from this piece for the rest of the day. If I pay too much attention to a painting, its alterity softens and withers. It needs to retain its selfhood.

## Practicing Restraint, Painting the Darkest Darks

The following day, I am itching to get new color onto the canvas. The rich buttery yellows of Naples, ochre, and raw Sienna beckon. But not yet. That would be jumping into these darlings too fast. I must hold back from what I want most here as any impatience shows in the painting. Any time I jump into color before it’s time, the painting suffers. Before plunging into these honeys, I need to establish who’s boss. *Shadow* is always boss in my paintings. Ursula taught me that dark shadows are never black and that black doesn’t exist in nature. I looked for 20 years for something black and gave up. I do not even own black oil paint. Darkness is a reservoir of molten color. To create the dark pitch needed for fissures, I mix burnt umber with French ultramarine blue and swirl these with my soft-tipped number four brush.

I step back from the painting to gauge where the main fissures should go, reminding myself to choose carefully; no need to account for each fissure or shadow, I just need gestures of darkness in a few key places. Like the subtle pulse of a bass guitar in the background of lively music, these dark shadows will anchor this painting and allow the buttery yellows to douse the viewer more sensuously. I paint darkness between the boulders above the water’s surface and step back to observe. It seems okay but it needs more. I paint fissures between the stacked layers of rock on the left side of the cliff. I use soft focus to find the other pools of dark in the photo. There. At the top of the cliff, where water dribbles down the crown of the cliff from the soft spongy moss, the earthen humus is a dark rich brown. Raw umber. I squeeze a large daub onto my palette, getting closer to the soft buttery yellows that I crave, and add two drops of linseed oil to the umber with my palette knife, cutting it into the pigment. I choose a large rounded filbert brush and paint the dark earth clinging to the crown of the cliff. This provides the contrast I need for the beautiful mottled greys of the cliff’s surface. I paint more dark shadows, stepping back twice to observe the painting from a distance. The painting’s beginning to assume a shape; it appears to know-where it’s going. This painting is working…so far.

## Movement

Where is the movement in this cove? It is in the stolid mineral wall that declares its sovereignty, its selfhood. It is in the soft ripples of sea water, mirroring the velvet greys and browns of the mineral rock wall. And finally, it is in the sweeping motion of the Douglas fir tree which leans further to the left each year and in its swooping branches. I want to differentiate the darkness of this tree from the dark brown of the humus on the cliff. I mix burnt umber with French ultramarine and add linseed oil. I choose a small clean filbert brush, and dip it into the mixed pigment. The tree needs to be one bold sweep; it *cannot* be studied*.* It must be *one motion,* just like the tree itself. I practice sweeping my right wrist up across the canvas from the right side of the canvas to the top like a golfer practicing her swing before taking a shot. I am overthinking this and so step back to get some distance from the painting, to regard it from a distance. The blue under layer glows. The tree will live within this glow.

The tree *cannot* touch the cliff. I remind myself, “don’t overthink this,” and approach my palette. I dip my brush into the matte dark brown and dab excess off on the tin foil. Without any thought, I place the tip of my brush at the far-right side of the canvas and boldly sweep my brush up in a motion curving towards the top. One sweep, one motion. I step back to see if it’s right. It is. But it needs thickening. I thicken the lower trunk and choose a small round brush to paint the branches. There are many of these in the blurry photograph. I need just a few so the viewer knows this is a fir tree. Too many will make it look fussy and crowded. I will paint in some reflected light on the branches tomorrow, the way Ursula showed me with my second painting, all those decades ago. She called this “scumbling:” dragging of oil paint lightly over dry paint to reveal bits of the dry paint beneath. This gives the effect of breath and life pulsing beneath the surface, hinting at a presence just out of view. All painters whom I admire use this technique.

I continue holding back from the delicious yellows and start on the water. This will change everything and will give the painting a different mood. I squeeze sap green pigment onto my palette, and add daubs of burnt Sienna and Portland grey, the colors of rocks reflected in the water. “One thing at a time,” I remind myself. Do not add too many colors, eight to 12, tops. Less is more. I dip my palette knife into my linseed oil and drop three beads of oil onto each daub of paint, mixing it into each one. I clean my knife between each color to preserve their integrity.

## Becoming Saline, Becoming More-Than-Human

I choose a silken flat brush for the sea water and dip its tip into my glossy sap green. I pause to remember what sea water feels like. Coolness ripples across my chest and down my arms. The dark saline water reflects the light within me and holds dark to itself. Sea water is MTH and yet also human, just like me (Neimanis, 2019). I gently remind myself to stop thinking, and instead to just *be* water. I become diffuse, spreading out in all directions, cold, dark, deep, other-than- human. I feel cold alterity from myself, otherness. I dip my brush into the solvent, drag it on the rag and scoop Prussian blue and sap green to give the water depth and the monstrously cold alterity I want this water to reflect. Sovereignty. I want this water to remain sovereign and dark, to echo the mysterious rock tower overhanging the cove, to talk to the darkness in the fissures of rock. I drag the flat edge of the brush from right to left across the lower canvas, and then flip the motion from left to right so there’s evenness across the painting. Calm water does not tilt, it gently laps and undulates. I block in most of the water. A quick glance at the small photo tells me there need to be light muted ribbons of color undulating on the surface. These will need to wait until I have painted in the rocks and the tree’s branches in order for the water to reflect what’s on the land. There is a sequence here and I must continue to restrain my eagerness to dive into the juicier colors. They will arrive in their own time, after the main color blocks have dried.

## Mineral Alterity and Familiarity During Painting

I am eager to paint the cliff’s cool grey in order to prep it for the bright yellow lichen spreading down its surface. I can feel an upwelling of anticipation at the prospect of engaging with the cliff. Why? Because I am the cliff, the vertiginous overhang, and heavy tons of rock which form the bulwark. I feel this in my shoulders, and in the back of my head, the heavy shoulder of rock in the photo. The minerals cycling in me are from the same deep time as the minerals in this cliff. There is recognition here, familiarity and alterity. Otherwise, I would not be called to return to this cove over the decades. This is my fifth painting of this landform; all previous versions have sold. Cliff, you are so strange in your otherness! I feel my cool mineral surface there, a companion to deep time. A fine-grained residue grinds between my molars. Slow down. Cool down. This rock face must stay strange and out of reach in this painting. Assume otherness from this cliff. Resist what you think you already know here. This cliff is a sovereign MTH being. Do not sentimentalize this landform, this magnificent wall. Keep it apart from yourself. Let it hold its otherness, its sovereignty.

I squeeze out daubs of cool Portland grey, Payne’s grey and a large coil of titanium white pigment, the medium that lightens all other colors. I mix linseed oil into each pigment, wipe my palette knife off and select a medium flat coarse brush which will give the rock a course texture. I dip the brush into the cool Portland grey and drag it softly down the rock face. Ursula emphasized the importance of mimicking the directional flow of landforms with the directional flow of my brushstrokes. This technique gives the surface the curvature, direction, and texture of the subject I am painting. Softly, I drag my grey and stop short of the bluish boulder just above the gap. There is surprisingly little cliff surface to paint. I want to apply more color but by holding back, I’ll enhance the drama of this strange rock face, leaving people wanting more. There is craving in catching a glimpse of mysterious alterity. This is what makes great paintings so magnetic. They keep us wanting…*more of them*. I step back and drink in the emerging painting. It’s becoming itself, taking on its cliffness, its minerality. I peer at the little photo. There is little to use here but it is all I need or want, as most of the information about this landform is stored inside me from hours of paddling beside this wall.

## Rocks

Burnt Sienna, burnt umber, raw Sienna, Prussian blue, titanium white. Earthen tones from earthen sources. I squeeze more color onto my palette, mixing linseed oil into each pigment so they glisten like butter. Ursula praised oil paints’ “buttery texture” the first time I met her 32 years ago, she crouched over her painting on my parents’ porch in St. Vincent Bay where I paint right now. I was 19 that day, a day that changed my life. How can soft buttery oil paint depict the radical alterity of rocks? Because the painter and her paints come from the same mineral origin as rocks. There is kinship here:

The deep or geological past is…the *repressed heart of lived time*…. Geomaterial phenomenology opens us to deep time’s distinctive stratigraphic rhythms - cosmic, geological, evolutionary, prehistoric - and the differential ways that these involve us affectively and corporeally. (Toadvine, 2019, p. 152, emphasis added)

I observe how the layers of rock change color as they recede from the water, and start painting those closest to the water. I choose unlikely burnt Sienna to color to their faces. I do not remember this oddly violet-tinged brown from my hours floating offshore, but here it is in the photograph. I choose clean brushes as I transition to painting rocks, higher rocks in order prevent muddying my colors. My good friend Roberta Nadeau, a successful professional painter, shared this trademark secret with me seven years ago, before she died: “Keep your colors clean and separate. Don’t mix them on your palette or on your canvas. This helps your colors stay powerful, and bold.”

I work to define each rock from its neighbor, so they do not blend and fuse into an indistinct turd lying across the beach. The fissures between the rocks need definition in order to keep the rocks distinct. This will have to wait until tomorrow or the next day, the paint is too wet to apply further pigment over top. If I continue painting over this, I will create a mess that will just take longer to dry. I leave the rocks and turn my attention to the left mineral tower. I choose a stiff flat coarse bristle brush for the job, as these are serious blocks that won’t tolerate soft lines. Stiff, angular, decisive, I follow the motion of the rocks with my brush without thinking. Just doing. Just becoming choppy blocky rocks. No mind. Just rock mind. Abram’s (2010) phenomenological writing was my portal into post-human phenomenology and agency in the MTH world. Abram vividly describes the animated selfhood, sovereignty and agency of a boulder outside his writing studio:

I’m suddenly struck by the immense exertion it would take to hold myself in such a stable posture, moment after moment, without flinching. To sustain itself in that position, steadily, so that even now it is still bearing that very shape, and still again, and yet again, hour after hour, and day after day – that must take a lot of effort! […] simply to hold itself together in a cosmos that is steadily flying apart, to prevail, year after year, against the suck of entropy, seems already to entail a kind of stubbornness, an obdurate persistence that we miss when we think of “being,” or bare existence, as a purely passive state. And so I find myself staring at this rock with a new astonishment – a new appreciation for its compacted energy, the wild activity that it displays by its simple presence. (p. 48)

As with Abram and his boulder, I observe this cliff’s alterity with esteem. It declares its selfhood, its difference from everything else, including the beings around it: the rocks, the sea water, the vegetation, the lichen which crawls with glacial slowness across its face, the animals who move around this cove, swooping, hunting, foraging. It retains its mysterious strength and alterity over the centuries, has not changed perceptibly over the 37 years I have been visiting this place. What has changed is the depth of its beauty and the intensity of its otherness as I return to this cove again and again.

## Slowing Down: Leaving the Painting Alone in Order to Return Again

After several days of leaving the painting alone, I return to look at it for the first time. It shocks me. It declares itself and demands the soft cloak of moss and lichen that initially attracted me, and which I resisted, knowing this is the most sensuous part of the painting to come. The surfaces of daubs of Naples yellow, ochre and raw Sienna paint have formed skins in the warm dry air. In order to access the smooth pigment within each glob of paint, I place my dry palette knife on top the glob and pull the surface down towards the tin foil, ripping the protective skin and peeling it back to expose the oily paint within. I apply soft yellows and light chrome green to the cliff’s terraces, the cushion of moss beneath the gap and the strange boulder on the beach, practicing slowness and self-restraint. As much as I want to splash around with these delicious beauties, I must hold myself back from play here. As the painting approaches completion, restraint is the name of the game. This is the point where slowness, distance from the painting, softening my focus, mind and body, and letting go of thoughts become critical for the painting.

Slowness is not a variant of speed. It is something completely different which enables me to drop out of analytical thinking and diffuse my mind. I vehemently disagree with Bishop and Phillips’ contention that slow is a variant of speed: “slowness […] should not be qualitatively opposed to speed, but rather the categories ‘slow’ and ‘fast’ should be regarded as relative powers of the single category ‘speed’” (cited in Sobchack, 2006, p. 338). By slowing the completion of the painting down, I allow *the painting* to tell *me* what needs doing. I am not in charge here; the painting is. I need to listen now to what the painting is saying and *stop painting*. This is the MTH world, the painting, directly addressing me. A diffuse mind with no pre-conceived ideas is needed here at this stage. This is my mentor’s teaching.

# *Phusis* In the Final Stages: My Painting Comes Towards Me

I stand five meters back from the painting, leaving the photograph taped to the easel, gazing softly, allowing thoughts to fall away. Dinner can wait. Cocktail hour can wait. I face my painting, listening. Silence. I hear the water of St. Vincent Bay lapping at the shore beneath my deck. A breeze lifts the nylon Canadian flag from its flaccid resting position on the flag pole. I hear a soft breeze life its fabric, which slithers against itself before settling to hang loosely again. I continue holding my gaze loosely on the painting. Blocks of color stand out. Shadows seem less intense than they should be, but I’m not sure how they should be. I keep my gaze soft, and don’t dig for answers. This is not pulling something out from the painting, this is letting it emerge on its own. This is *phusis*, the painting emerging to meet me half way. I grow towards the painting, its alterity, while it speaks to me in its own dialect. It says “darker. More definition. Make the darks darker. Define the hollows more. Bring dark into the dark.” And right there, I know darker is needed.

I step to my palette and mix more burnt umber with French ultramarine blue. So deliciously black and yet not black. The oily pigment shines with the lustre of obsidian. It is all the depth of night, and the shimmering lustrous color of a black bear’s coat as he moves along the shore, but it is not black. I insert this darkness into cracks between boulders, into the water, and the fir tree’s trunk. I step back again to listen. “What’s missing?” I ask the painting. Again, I employ diffuse mind, letting go my desire to grasp, complete, enclose, or master the painting that is coming meet me. This is what I feel and hear coming towards me from the painting: “Texture. Foliage. Softness that will talk to the hardness. Delicate. Bending lilting.” I know what the painting’s saying. It needs foliage, soft wisps of grass, ferns and branches, brushing and softening the hard bold blocks of color, the waving at the tons of rock. I need juicy green pigments to distinguish the soft grasses and branches from the surrounding darkness. I squeeze out viridian green and mix it with Naples yellow to create a bright mint color for the crisp lichen growing on the upper terraces. With a semi-dry brush. I drag this over the Naples yellow moss that dried days earlier. While hardy salal sprouts in clumps nearly everywhere in the underbrush, I only need to gesture towards a few clumps, two to three tops. Otherwise, the painting will become cluttered and fussy. For the stiff salal leaves, I mix the indelible viridian green with cerulean blue, to soften the viridian’s chemical intensity.

Using a supple rounded brush, I dab salal leaves on upper rock terraces, following the slope’s contours. I add sap green and Prussian blue to deepen the tone of salal growing in the underbrush, so it is absorbed into the mysterious shadow of the forest. Wiping the bright green used for the foreground salal off my brush with the rag, and scoop up this darker green/blue and place it around the base of the fir tree on the far right. Not too much. I do not want it to appear busy or overworked. I step back again. “Not too much more here, but something’s still needed,” the painting says. The water. Stop mirroring every shape in the water. Water holds some things to itself. “Darken the water, let it hold its mystery to itself. Let a few reflections stand out.” I know what it’s saying. “Less is more.” While I’ve spent considerable time and care painting ribbons of grey, Sienna and blue on the water’s surface, they’re too much. Most need to go.

I take up my wide silken flat brush and dab it into sap green, adding Prussian blue. I stroke it against a dry clean patch of my palette, dragging excess paint off so it's not sloppy when I apply it. Slowly, I carefully drag it over the colorful ripples I painted three days ago. As I do this, the energetic quality of the painting drops down into a lower register. The painting itself *slows down.* I feel its pulse turn. It’s nearing completion. I listen. “Soft soft hard hard solid see through dark you are getting close…more feathery grassssssssssss,”the painting whispers. The pulse is languid, slow, deep, alive. Using a very fine rigger brush, I apply a few stalks of dry crisp grass, swaying in the gap beneath the cliff. And then, I stop. Enough. No more. At least for now. I take several steps back to gaze at this painting. It stares back at me. We meet one another’s gaze. The painting and I have co-emerged in this moment of familiarity and mutual recognition.

# Encountering Deep Time: Starting with Direct Lived Experience, Not Theory

I turn briefly here to a debate in phenomenological history, about our human ability to contemplate time anterior to human existence. Husserl (Himanka, 2005), one of the founders of phenomenology, asserted that all our knowledge and learning about the world must start with our lived experience which he insisted is rooted in the earth. The accepted scientific theory that the earth moves around the sun is based on theory, *not* on our direct sensory experience of the earth moving. Husserl argued that we since experience the earth as a stable unchanging presence, and not as a moving body, all of our subsequent experience derives from this initial and continuing experience. And so, while we learn about the heliocentric worldview as small children, our senses tell us otherwise; they tell us that the earth does *not* move. Himanka (2005) highlights this contradiction between our senses and scientific theory (p. 627), exemplified in peoples’ descriptions of “sunrises” and “sunsets” instead of the “earthrises” and “earthsets” that would describe a heliocentric ontology (Roth, 2015, p. 477).

The phenomenological starting point of Husserl's argumentation is to see that the earth originally…is not a thing: … All of us, including Copernicus himself, do not originally see the earth as a body. From this it does not follow that the Copernican theory is wrong…we acknowledge only that it is not a legitimate starting point for a phenomenological investigation of the earth. (Himanka, 2005, p. 633).

Husserl’s insistence on the earth as a stable unchanging presence and not a body strikes me as the particularly view of someone living inland, away from a coastline where land’s boundary with water is in continual flux. Husserl’s primacy of direct first-hand experience over scientific theory and language is taken up by Merleau-Ponty (Himanka, 2005), acknowledges the empirical tendency to alienate us from our intuitive experiences.

It [the earth] is something initial, a possibility of reality, the earth as a pure fact, the cradle, the basis and the ground of all experience. Knowledge has affected all this, it has forgotten this onto logical relief. (Himanka, 2005, p. 636)

Merleau-Ponty was referring to how scientific theories, like earth’s movement around the sun, contradict our lived sensory experience and make us doubt their veracity. This ontic doubt, about the veracity of our senses to tell us reliably about the world, alienates us from senses, and therefore, from ourselves. Empiricism would likely tell me that *phusis* does not exist. Rocks do not emerge. They just are. But my senses and pre-reflective intuition tell me otherwise. I allow knowledge to fall away so that I can feel with my senses the ongoing process of *phusis*, in landforms, my painting practice and in my body.

This view of the earth as the basis of all experience is not new and strikes me as akin to relational ontologies which regard the earth as the sustaining nurturer of all human and MTH existence. Indigenous research (Kimmerer, 2013;Wildcat, 2005; Marker, 2018), feminist research (Barad, 2017; Mountz et al., 2015; Behrisch, 2020) and educational approaches (Fettes, 2013; Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010; Blenkinsop & Fettes, 2020) share an emphasis on the primacy of unmediated first-hand experience in the world. In presenting my phenomenological experience of oil painting landforms above, I consider my direct experience observing the cove from a kayak floating on the ocean, which contradicts both Husserl’s originary earth that does not move as well as the Copernican heliocentric worldview. This is how I initially encounter coastal landforms, which *do* move in relation to my body. The watery context of my experience of painting presents the earth and its horizon as a dynamic unstable environment, contradicting Husserl’s (Himanka, 2005) inland insistence on the earth’s permanence. Seen from the water, the earth is *not* a permanent stable presence; it moves in relation to the sea; the sea moves in relation to the ground; I move in relation to the sea and land as I sit floating in my kayak observing landforms and taking photographs to use for my oil painting.

# The Paradox of Deep Time

The phenomenological debate about time anterior to human existence began in 1951 between Ayer, an analytic philosopher, and continental philosophers Bataille, Merleau-Ponty and Ambrosino, (Toadvine, 2014). Ayer contended that surely the sun existed anterior to a human observer while the continental philosophers contended there is no time, and no sun anterior to a human subject, using the lack of direct human lived experience of deep time anterior to a human subject. This latter view leans heavily towards anthropocentrism, placing the human subject at the center of the universe and affording her sole agency to ascribe meaning to what she observes. I highlight the tension between scientific theory and sensory experience here to address the ontic debate within phenomenology about deep time, which no person has directly experienced. Or have we?

Phenomenologist Toadvine (2014) reminds us that the elements of our bodies share the same origin in deep time as the elements of landforms. Contemplating a fossil, Toadvine describes how our senses provide the *only* means with which to encounter time outside human experience, such as the origin of a fossil, time following our own death, and time anterior and posterior to human existence; we can experience none of these directly. Our senses enable us to consider these temporal phenomena that exceed our moment-to-moment lived experience.

Far from ruling out an encounter with the ancestral [past, phenomenology] is the only fruitful method for investigating it…far from dismissing the anteriority of the world as self-contradictory or as a mere illusion, phenomenology has doggedly pursued it precisely by embracing the contradiction as constitutive of our experience of the world. (Toadvine, 2014, p. 273).

Through carefully analyzing Merleau-Ponty’s writing on the embedded nature of the human observer (Toadvine, 2014, p. 274), Toadvine nudges us away from the incommensurability between first hand observation raised by the continental philosophers above and time anterior to human existence. However, the anthropocentric temporal debate begun in 1951 remains an ontic question within phenomenology.

# Relational Ontologies, Phenomenology and Oil Painting

Relational ontologies reveal the non-universality of phenomenology’s ontic debate about deep time. They teach us that the world has a life *in spite of* a human observer. Things are growing, dying, shifting and adapting, undergoing *phusis* in the MTH world regardless of a human subject. Relational ontologies, including Indigenous, animist and feminist world views (Reid et al., 2020; Anderson, 2011; Simpson, 2014; Stuckey, 2010; Abram, 2010; Haraway, 2016); Neimanis, 2019) decenter the human and distribute subjecthood among an array of MTH beings. Relational ontologies present the corollary to the notion of time anterior to human existence that the lifeworld continues to unfold independent of a centralized human observer. Abram (2010; 1997) celebrates the earth’s sentience and immanence as the starting point for all human thoughts and sensory experience. This is not a new idea; this has been part Indigenous ontologies for thousands of years. There is no incommensurability between temporal anteriority and firsthand lived observation emphasized by the phenomenological approach.

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My firsthand practice of oil painting supports and strengthens my belief in a relational animist ontology of a decentered human and distributed subjecthood among the MTH world, such as the landforms and oil paintings discussed in this paper. Relationality opens the possibility of reflexivity of observation between me as a human and the MTH world. I observed and was observed by the landform of the cove, and by my painting.

# Conclusion

In describing my moment-to-moment artistic practice, I shared my firsthand experience of *phusis*, which seems to encompass *techne* as a human expression of *phusis*. During my process of practicing painting, I kept my mind diffuse and took regular long breaks from the painting. This allowed it to retain its alterity from me, an important quality in good paintings, which need to retain their strange mystery, even to me as the artist. As the painting *Cove* developed, it took on its own sovereign voice, its own sovereign nature. This called me to meet it half way to learn what it had to say. The dual practices of oil painting and phenomenology collide in my firsthand encounter with the mineral alterity of the rock wall and in the paints, solvents and oils with which I work. This encounter brings me into contact with deep time, a concept that eludes enclosure within phenomenological circles, knowable only through my senses and through a relational ontology.

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