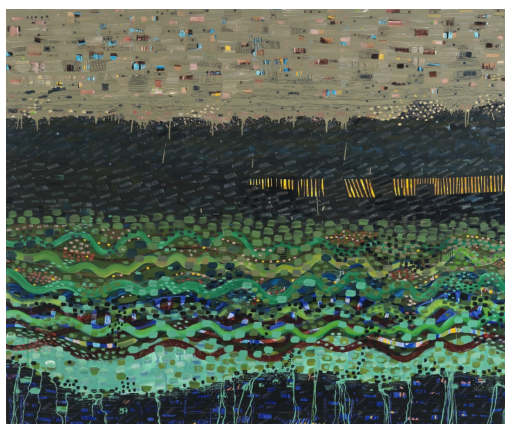


ART • WEEKEND

Anne Neely's Ethical Abstractions

Neely has created paintings that respond to some of the major issues of the day: climate change, environmental water loss, and immigration.

Carl Little August 22, 2020



Anne Neely, "Sediment" (2008), oil on linen, 60 x 72 inches (all images courtesy of the artist, photos by Stewart Clements)

In "Fearful Symmetries," written to accompany a portfolio of her paintings in the journal *Agni* in 2018, [Anne Neely](#) underscored the importance of her Maine home and studio to her work. "In the last 30 years," she wrote, "most of my paintings have begun or were imagined or conceived of in this place. Whether I am scanning and scraping the insides of my life or facing outward to the ocean and horizon, I move through whatever it takes to make a painting,

here."

The "here" is Jonesport, a fishing village on the Maine coast near Canada. In this remote and picturesque place, far from the madding crowd (and her second home in Boston) Neely has created paintings that respond to some of the major issues of the day: climate change, environmental water loss, and immigration.

Water loss, in particular, caught Neely's attention in 2004 when she read Marq de Villiers's groundbreaking *Water: The Fate of Our Most Precious Resource* (2001). As she recounts in the catalogue for her 2014 exhibition *Water Stories: Conversations in Paint and Sound* at the Museum of Science in Boston, the book set her off "to find ways to paint unseen aquifers and to interpret the growing dilemmas around rivers, streams, lakes, and oceans.

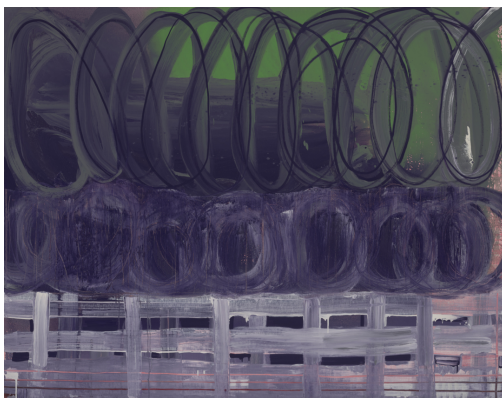


Anne Neely, "Mudflat" (2008), oil on linen, 36 x 44 inches

The first fruit of Neely's water explorations appeared in 2007. Some pieces reflect her fascination with aquifers. In "Sediment" and "Strata" (both 2008) she represents these unseen underground layers of water-bearing permeable rock as colorful cross-sections, accumulations of imaginary unconsolidated materials — gravel, sand, silt — that form intricate tapestry-like compositions. The horizontal orientation and layered

arrangement conjure landscapes, but ones that are essentially abstract.

Other paintings are complex seascapes that draw on Neely's Maine home, in sight of the ocean. "Mudflat" and "A Front," also from 2008, are down-east scenes, such as a tidal zone or an oncoming storm, transformed into captivating abstractions. They bear out what poet William Corbett wrote in his essay for *Just the Elements* at Boston's Alpha Gallery in October 2008 — they "give us what we long to see when we're not looking out to sea for ourselves."



Anne Neely, "Immigration" (2019), oil on linen, 56 x 72 inches

Considering the subject is water it is fitting that Neely starts her works by pouring paint on the canvas, providing a base on which to add a wide range of marks. Accumulations and layers of multicolored circles, squares, rectangles, and other inscriptions span the surface of her landscapes. "The marks help define the passage of time both in the work and in the course of making it," she explained in a statement

for *Water Stories* in 2014. This layering process, which she likens to joinery, harks back to her two decades immersed in printmaking.

The work in *Mopang: Recent Paintings* at the Geduld Gallery in September 2011 was inspired by a water success story near Neely's Maine home. Concerned citizens in the area organized the Clean Water Coalition in 1989 to successfully prevent a toxic ash dump from being sited in the Mopang Aquifer in Township 30 near Perry, Maine.



Anne Neely, "Cahoosic" (2011), oil on linen, 60 x 80 inches

Once again, the painter built upon a poured foundation, sometimes adding visual elements that heighten her focus on what lies below the surface of the land. For example, in "Cahoosic" (2011), a narrow horizontal band composed of tree shapes near the top represents the world above while almost all of the rest of the canvas is a shimmering field of gold, the safeguarded subterranean aquifer flowing under rock, shale, and soil that here recalls, as critic Franklin

Einspruch noted in a review of *Mopang*, a geological survey by Gustav Klimt.

For the aforementioned show at the Boston Museum of Science, Neely upped the ante in her response to the devastation of water sources. The 14 large canvases, which were accompanied by Halsey Burgund's soundscapes, had four broad themes with more specific references: mismanagement and overuse (damming of the Colorado River and depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer); contamination and pollution (the 2014 coal ash spill in the Dan River in Eden, North Carolina, and algae blooms in Lake Erie); climate change (Hurricane Sandy and melting glaciers in Alaska); and water mining (fracking the Marcellus Shale in Pennsylvania and tapping Maine's spring waters).

The paintings are gorgeous, yet an ominous quality imbues many. Titles like "Bloom," "Run Off," "Lost (River)," "Calving," and "Spill" provide thematic pointers, while the abstract visuals convey the experience of a phenomenon. As Neely told Robin Young, the host of NPR's Here and Now, as they stood before the painting "Bloom" (2014), "I feel that it's very, very important to allow the viewer to look into the painting through beauty, but they will all of a sudden realize this green is incredibly acidic, lurid ... there's a foreboding." (Neely further explained



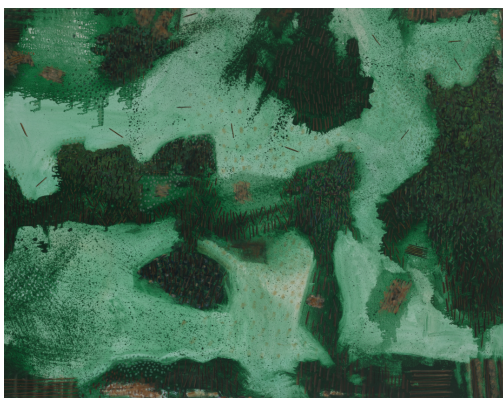
Anne Neely, "Bloom" (2014), oil on linen,
60 x 52 inches

her process in a [gallery talk](#) at Cove Street Arts in Portland, Maine, in late 2019.)

Beginning last year, Neely picked up where she left off with *Water Stories*, endeavoring "to define and articulate the unknowable that invariably emerges in the wake of seen or experienced events," as she put it in an email in late June. She also returned to climate change issues, "breathtaking in scope and thus always a challenge to paint."

This past October Neely invited me to see some of the new work at her

Jonesport studio. She had just been to see [Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown](#) at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, New York, and was fired up — about the work of one her favorite artists (who also poured) as well as the paintings she had produced over the past year. As events across the country and around the world weighed on her — climate change, children and families jailed in ICE detention centers, record wildfires — her art was becoming an increasingly visceral outlet.



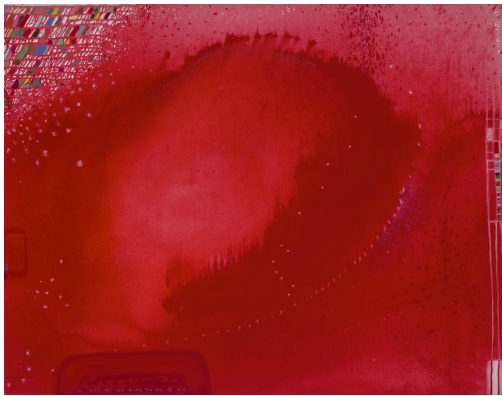
Anne Neely, "Changes in the Land" (2019), oil on linen, 56 x 72 inches

"Changes in the Land" (2019) takes its title from a book by William Cronon about the environmental shift in New England during the 1700s as European settlers gained dominance over the land. The painting is a response to the news that deforestation in the Amazon had reached a record high. "That information served as ballast as well a thread that led me into a visceral green pour consisting of washed green paint, then darker, more decisive forms,"

Neely wrote me recently. The pour is "groundwork" for the subjective, she says:

I emerge with the canvas covered, step back and, over time, let the painting find its own meaning. This painting became focused on the information and on mark-making, tinkering to clarify the intention of the painting, a tree here, piled lumber there. The patterning is set up to counter the vast washed emptiness, the sweat of trees, left behind.

“Conflagration” (2019) came about as parts of California erupted in flames in the summer and fall of 2019. Neely felt “as though there was no air left, that it had been sucked out of that part of the world,” a feeling that returned with news of the fires in Australia that fall. Using red for the first time in a pour, she explained that the color could “capture the tightness I had in my throat, the suffocation.”



Anne Neely, “Conflagration” (2019), oil on linen, 56 x 72 inches

The pour took 10 to 12 hours. Neely added part of a chair in the lower left corner, to represent the “watchful observer,” herself, distant witness to the deadly fires. In the upper left, she painted “the corner of life,” a colorful grid standing in for the threatened houses, with “the impossible heat expanding towards them.” The painting captures the fiery maelstrom to the point where it seems it might ignite the room.

“Immigration” (2019) is even more direct in its message. Gray fencing and dark curls that evoke barbwire cross the picture plane, closing off the landscape beyond.

“Stormy Weather” was painted in Jonesport this past spring amid the COVID-19 pandemic. “The rains came, and the ground turned that freshly fragile green,” Neely wrote to me; “I felt hopeful.” The painting harks back to the above/below compositions in her *Mopang* series. Here, storm clouds cross gray skies at the very top of the canvas while, below, the aquifer offers its splendid layered riches. The band of green near the middle brings to mind the Dylan Thomas poem [“The force that through the green fuse drives the flower”](#) (1933).



Anne Neely, "Stormy Weather" (2020),
oil on linen, 45 by 60 inches

“What does it mean to be an artist now?” Neely asked her audience at the Cove Street Gallery in January. “How do we converse with the world now?” She noted the “continuous argument” she has with herself “about innocence and knowledge, and where are you as a painter experiencing the innocence of an idea, of a vision of looking at something, and where do you bring knowledge into it?”

In her coastal Maine outpost Neely has managed to take knowledge — of ecology and climate issues — and incorporate it into work that is at once provocative and pleasing to the eye. May she continue to argue with herself and converse with the world.

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