
LITTER-ALLY KENTUCKY

Collage en plein air

by John Andrew Dixon

Artistic Approach and Exhibition Theme

Influenced by a foundation in visual design, my artwork is layered with complexity and alludes to the history of collage as a modern art. I'm intrigued and inspired by how that avant-garde approach evolved into contemporary collage. I bring this awareness to representational art, which typically has not been associated with the medium.

I restrict my handcrafted process to recycled or trashed materials and, using this traditional orientation, exhibited collage art for over a decade. In 2017, I was accepted into the Kentucky Crafted program. During that same year, my love for the outdoors and the tradition of plein air led me to attempt "painting in papers." As I solved the challenges of creating paper landscapes outside, I developed an interest in using collage art to bring awareness to the ongoing problem of littering.

This objective became the theme of an application for support during the aftermath of lockdowns. I then received an Artist Rescue grant from the Kentucky Arts Council with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. The resulting body of work is "LITTER-ALLY KENTUCKY" — with sixteen collage landscapes created from discarded paper, ruined publications, tissue, reclaimed tea bags, and fragments of actual litter that I accumulated from streets and roadways. I include scraps of printed text in my artwork to suggest subtle highlights or areas of shadow, but also to remind viewers that it is, after all, a collage.

Similar to improvisational music, collage making can be about the creative tension between chaos and order. If the natural setting that I observe is the written melody, the qualities of the paper — color, form, value, pattern, texture — serve as the notes, rests, and rhythms of the visual interpretation. Nearly everyone can understand and relate to cutting and pasting paper, and people respond



positively to art made from stuff that would otherwise be thrown away. Collage offers a universal experience of seeing things in a new light. It's been rewarding to share this sense of discovery with others. It fuels my enthusiasm for representational collage and how it can spark conversations about our relationship to the preservation of rural beauty.

The messages of nature are everywhere — the steadiness of a flowing river, the quiet magnificence of a horizon of knobs, or even the willpower of a plant that pushed through an asphalt crack. When we connect our awareness with natural places, we are unlikely to scar them with careless waste from the habits of life. Individuals who appreciate the labor and affection of those who care for land, will not diminish an environment, nor expect others to bear the burden of cleaning it up. Littering is a issue with roots in people who are disconnected from their common homeland — and the water, earth, and vegetation around them. Instead of limiting our understanding to economics and enforcement, or blaming cultures of ignorance and disrespect, perhaps we can pledge a better effort to reach others with the consciousness of accountability and stewardship that comes with a deeper regard for the created world as a divine inheritance.