

Susquehanna Story Project

Clara Studdard

Abstract

The Susquehanna Story Project was an individualized project in which the students wrote articles, short stories, or created artwork in order to express a “river story”. I relayed the story of Turkey Hill, a hill with a landfill and wind turbines located on the Susquehanna River. I uncovered the reasons that the landfill was not expanded were due to a popular American artist named Jeff Koons. I chose to visually “tell” this story and created a painting that displayed the current realities of the land, as well as, the possible realities if the expansion had not been prevented.



Artist Statement

There are always underlying stories set within the land, both old as its creation and as recent as yesterday. The Susquehanna River is no exception to this. As a class in the brisk afternoon of one October day we took to the waters and explored our surroundings. As we were paddling we

heard many stories from our guide that had to do with the surrounding areas, what stood out to me the most was the very simple and to the point recent history of Turkey Hill and its connection to the art world.

I see Turkey Hill convenience stores, gas stations, ice cream, bottled teas, and much more, and yet I never thought the location of Turkey Hill was an actual place. As an aesthetic location, it rests right on the edge of the Susquehanna River with two distinct wind turbines off the top side. The only portion of this hill that does not fulfill the picturesque scene is the very top. What is referred to as a bald top on a hill is often the result of construction, mining, or landfills, and in this case the bald top of Turkey Hill is a landfill.

Jeffery Koons is a popular American artist of the 21st century. He is well known for his enormous balloon animal sculptures and as one of the highest grossing artists of

the modern day. He is also the most prominent monetary reason the Turkey Hill landfill was not expanded vertically over 50 feet to accommodate more waste. Koons' interest in preserving the view of the hill and in preventing excessive waste runoff and pollution into the body of water is not just an environmental investment, but a personal one. He holds property in the form of a small farm directly across from Turkey Hill which brings about his desire in preserving that natural land.

I wanted to take this story and depict the land of Turkey Hill in a way that was both beautiful and devastating. Using the bright colors and heavy contrasts of the sky I sought to express both a lovely sunset and the polluted plumes of clouds that are more prominent around areas of heavy waste disposal. I kept the current reality of Turkey Hill present as a more realistic style and pushed the possibilities of further polluted landmass with brighter color and less realistic line work. This works to show depth and an unnatural change of the land that would disappear into the piece if I worked with realism throughout the piece. I wished to show the land as it is and as it could have been.

Reflection

As I worked on this piece, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out the best way to depict the scene of Turkey Hill as I viewed it in reality as well as the additional aspects of the idea of what could have been. I explored multiple pathways to reach this goal and brainstormed utilizing more physical materials over the paint. For example, using trash to depict the expanded landfills or using dollar bills to cover areas protected by money. There are endless possibilities in how to depict a scene like this as it is not a reality. Art is meant to make a statement and push the audience to think beyond much like writing. I wanted to

push that boundary by making a piece that would be considered beautiful with a subject matter that is truly upsetting in nature. Much of this project reflected what could have been in contrast to what exists in this current time. I am so grateful that the "what if" of the expanded landfill on Turkey Hill has never reached fruition. I was so enamored with this small part of the Susquehanna and the experience of being on the river and seeing the sun reflected off the hill as it set is something that will be a part of my memory forever.

We all have our river stories and Jeff Koons is no exception. As I researched the story of Jeff Koons and Turkey Hill past what had been told to me on our kayaking trip, I realized that there is little to no information on the subject available. There were no articles that explained the conclusion of the Turkey Hill expansion, the subject was just dropped and everyone who spoke about it spoke as though Koons paid a lot to keep the land as it was. I attempted to delve more into the topic and fell down the rabbit hole of who donates to protect lands and is it truly people that are in that upper echelon of wealth that can affect the shaping of the land in the face of environmental destruction. Money is not a topic spoken about freely, despite us living in a distinctly capitalist society and with this we don't often have fully transparent information involving donations to conservation projects. Money can be politically charged or personally motivated, and with the privatization of donations, we lack information on which influences the processes of conservation more. The lack of knowledge around this adds a whole new layer of secrecy that makes the process of conservation and the motivation to rally around environmental issues difficult to pursue.

When we deal with environmental issues, we rely on the greater power around

us to tell us how to help, what we should or should not do, and whether or not they will even do anything in the first place. Companies and corporations have an exceedingly tight hold on conservation efforts, especially when they revolve around natural resources and oil. It grips how we treat the world around us and how the mentality of “the consumer is the problem” can proliferate so abundantly. Of course we can make an effort and change the way we live and that will make a difference, especially in your life, but the real problem always leads back to those companies and corporations.

Conclusion

Overall, what I have learned during this project is that there are layers of stories that mix and melt into the land and the river. These stories create more stories and everything ripples out from the source. We may be able to shape the land with tools, neglect, and time, but the words and the

stories attached to those places let us know that before this land became what it is now, it was something else that has even more stories that have melted away into the land. We may never know these stories, but we feel them there, in a layer so deep down it melds with the darkness behind our eyes. We may have found a way to disconnect from the land, but we will always be a part of it despite this. Maybe this is why we fight to preserve the natural world so completely against those who continue to pursue their disconnection to the world.

References

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