
CHRISTOPHER VOLPE
LOOMINGS
PAINTINGS IN TAR
OIL & GOLD LEAF
With Essays on Melville
America & The Redeeming Power of Darkness

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With Essays on Melville, America,
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The Deep Dive: On Reading *Moby-Dick*
And Making Art in the Anthropocene

The suburban street I grew up on ended in an industrial oil storage facility. Neat Norwegian maples gave way to a view of 14,000-gallon tanks and what we called “the dock” — a bulkhead of tar-sticky railroad ties separating the street from Long Island sound. My teenage friends and I clung to the water-facing side of “the dock” to work our way back onto the street when high tide stranded us on the beach below. Sometimes at night we would climb the ladders of Commander Oil’s pastel-painted petroleum tanks to survey the inky void of salt water like sailors on a derelict vessel.

There’s probably much more asphalt than grass or even dirt on Long Island now. Well before I was born, thousands of acres of Long Island potato farms and cornfields were paved to make way for the nation’s earliest suburbs, prototypes of urban sprawl. In 1959, Nassau county still had 7,406 acres of farmland. By 2012, just 2,682 acres remained; the rest had been paved over. As a brooding teenager, I considered asphalt’s ubiquitous reach darkly symbolic. It’s well-known now that, as Nassau’s county planners admitted in a 2010 study, “Monotonous strip commercial centers with extensive asphalted parking areas are unable to create a sense of place for the local communities that surround them.”

Looking back, it makes sense that as an artist I work with tar, largely because of its associations with industrialization and fossil fuels. It seems to many an odd choice, and I’m often asked how I came to it. I had been thinking about mixing my paint with tar (I use the pourable form - liquefied coal tar - available in buckets from a hardware store) after reading about 19th century painters who’d used a compound of tar and linseed oil called asphaltum to enrich their shadows. I was also reading Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and became fascinated by the narrator’s description of a puzzling oil painting on a tavern wall.

The Turneresque painting Ishmael describes seeing in the Spouter Inn is nearly abstract (Melville actually uses that word). The picture's "unaccountable masses of shades and shadows" evoke for the narrator a vivid series of loaded images: "a blasted heath… the Black Sea in a midnight gale… the unnatural combat of the four primal elements … the breaking-up of the ice-bound stream of Time." What better medium than tar, I thought, with which to realize such a "boggy, soggy, squitchy picture," suggestive of "chaos bewitched," evoking our own ship of state, facing down climate change in the form of a commercial vessel overcome by "a great hurricane, the half-foundered ship weltering there" and about to go down?

* * *

Liquid coal tar isn't actually black; it's a very dark brown, yielding an impenetrable and metallic raven-black at full strength and warm, earthy sepia tones when thinned. As a medium, it makes its own rules; tar is base matter, chthonic and miasmatic, aqueous, sticky, carcinogenic even; it oozes, pools, gushes, splatters, and drips like black blood, polluted water, or the crude oil from which it is derived. Tar is an alchemical substance, the ultimate substance for the final goal, the "Great Work," of painting: transformation of the material into the immaterial, transmutation of base matter into spiritual essence.

Joined in application with titanium white oil paint, tar for me embodies what Clement Greenberg (writing of Jackson Pollock's monochromatic palette in 1943) called "that American chiaroscuro which dominated Melville, Hawthorne, Poe." My first "Spouter Inn" painting led to a series of others, all using tar. I called the series *Loomings* after *Moby-Dick's* first chapter. Although each painting's title refers in some way to the novel, they're not illustrations of *Moby-Dick*. Rather, the paintings are visual

equivalents of reading the novel as an apocalyptic vision of the American quest.

Why apocalyptic? *Moby-Dick* is a blueprint for disaster, a symbolic scaffold for Empire's reckoning with its sins (namely, the exploitation of human beings and natural resources). It's "a true journey into the underworld of the American psyche, as were the journeys of Dante and Faust in their societies," as Robert D. Wagner has written, with the narrator as every orphaned, alienated modern self discovering dominion is fantasy (*Moby-Dick and the Mythology of Oil)*. It's tragedy in stark tones, to my mind best imagined in impenetrable black and ghastly white. I like what Robert Motherwell said about black: "Black is technically not a color, non-being if you like. Then what is more natural than a passionate interest in juxtaposing black and white, being and non-being, life and death."

And death hovers over our days like an albatross. Presently, the world's scientists have concluded that we have about 10 years to stop spewing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere before runaway climate change heats the earth to the point of catastrophic no return. By then, if not sooner, many scientists fear, enough arctic sea ice will have melted to ensure increasingly large amounts of hyper-heat-trapping methane gas and widening swaths of exposed, heat-absorbing ocean will combine to kick off unstoppable feedback loops that raise global temperatures to the point that major crops fail, worldwide fisheries die, economies plummet, and various societies degenerate or collapse. No one knows exactly how this will play out in terms of resource wars, human migration, disastrous droughts, floods and other extreme weather events as well as the inevitable inundation of coastal communities and cities cowering before sea level rise. Maybe we need apocalyptic imagery to say no to the apocalypse. Or maybe we need the apocalypse to start over and live differently on the planet.

I first read *Moby-Dick* for a class on Whitman and Melville at Stony Brook University in the 1990s. Though I didn't quite make it to the end, I was captivated enough, not least by its cosmic sense of the inevitable, to pick it

up again some 20 years later during what I recall as a particularly stormy, bitter winter. I was a working as a copywriter, what Melville would have called a "scrivener," occupying converted 19th century servants' quarters in a small New England seaside town. I remember being shocked at how much time flew by as I sipped cognac and turned the pages into the night, oblivious until bedtime how wildly the wooden floors creaked and the windows strained.

* * *

The motif of the battered ship dwarfed by impersonal forces resonates for me with what American Zen Buddhist priest Steve Hagen has said, of which I imagine Melville would have approved: "What we overlook is that underneath the ground of our beliefs, opinions, and concepts is a boundless sea of uncertainty. The concepts we cling to are like tiny boats tossed about in the middle of the vast ocean. We stand on our beliefs and ideas thinking they're solid, but in fact, they (and we) are on shifting seas."

What all great art is trying to express is a full and authentic intuition of the condition of being human. And what but civilization's looming demise could make this any clearer or more important? It dawned on me one day in my studio while strapping on a kind of gas mask I use to work with the noxious material: it's not just remarkable parallels -- there are direct links between the fate of the Pequod and what we're learning about the potential for human suffering (if not extinction) from human-induced climate change. Whale oil was the 19th century precursor and equivalent of today's fossil fuels. It literally "greased the wheels" of the industrial revolution. We are literally at the mercy of dangerous, shifting seas. So at least in part, I want *Loomings* to invoke Melville's novel as the foundational myth of our own age of accelerating climate change and social disruption.

For, as writer Chris Hedges has written, "Melville makes our murderous obsessions, our hubris, violent impulses, moral weakness and inevitable self-destruction visible in his chronicle of a whaling voyage." Melville is our Tolstoy and our Shakespeare and *Moby-Dick* is a "prescient portrait of the

American character and our ultimate fate as a species." Indeed, we are all aboard the Pequod now.

* * *

Many critics consider *Moby-Dick* the greatest American novel because it's alive with what Nathaniel Philbrick calls "the DNA of America," and in it, every generation of Americans sees itself reflected. There's 21st century America in the nearly willful self-destruction of the megalomaniac Ahab, the slack complicity of his uncomprehending crew, and the hijacked ship itself on its brutal and deadly mission. As Philbrick has noted, Melville makes the melting-pot Pequod (named after a decimated native American tribe) function as a metaphor for the country by making it carry as many native Americans, African Americans, South Sea Islanders, Middle Easterners, Nantucketers, and other immigrant blacks, browns, and whites as there were states in the union of 1850. It's made of wood, Melville writes, that "could only be American."

Ahab the religious fanatic whips his crew (what we might call his "base") into a frenzy of hatred and resolve with fiery partisan rhetoric paired with the promise of a symbolic gold coin nailed to the ship's center mast for the first man who "sings out" at sight of Moby Dick. (Just as with the reward Columbus promised his first crewman to sight land, ultimately the captain claims the gold for himself.) Pip, the novel's Shakespearean "wise fool" character, describes the centrally located doubloon as the "ship's naval," which all the mad fanatics on board are "on fire to unscrew." Even at the start of the novel, Melville makes sure we note that Ahab's is a commercial enterprise with parodic caricatures of the ship's callous Quaker owners, eager to squeeze every penny of profit from the deaths of the animals and the men who hunt them.

Whaling was the first industry in which America dominated the world. Yet whaling's "floating factories" were only a precedent for industrialized civilization as a whole. As Melville foresaw in 1850, "the all-grasping

Western world" was and is apparently hellbent on hunting down everything in nature that can be commoditized. For us it's oil from the earth instead of the sea, but Melville's time and ours are the same.

Poet Heathcote Williams has pointed out that every American president is tasked, Ahab-like, with capturing the massive fuel resources that enable the "fanatical consumerism rebranded as progress" that keeps the world's precarious economy going. The novel is "a sea-story presaging an empire's signature crime," as Williams has written. Just as Ahab vilified the whale to gain the backing of his crew, American presidents point to a "brutal regime," a "threat to democracy," a "humanitarian crisis," or an "axis of evil" to justify wresting control of much of the global oil and precious mineral supply. And lest we forget, none of this ends well.

Somehow, Melville created art in the mid-1800s that still critiques the nation we inhabit, even as he raises profound questions about the story of humanity itself. I've tried to pay homage to his example in my own work regarding the question of fossil fuels and the fate of the planet.

* * *

I am an artist making paintings with tar because I picked a terrible time to become a landscape painter, when the horrible things humanity is doing to nature have become the central issue of the age. My entry into visual art was inspired by the shared aesthetics between 19th century American landscape painting and the classic American authors, particularly Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson, and Poe. Considered in the context of that body of literature, painting emerges as a vehicle for poetry and meaning.

But those painters and writers knew a different America, a different world and time. As I learned more and more about what we're doing to the planet and ourselves, it didn't feel authentic or honest to make soothing or formally

interesting pictures any more. A timely rereading of *Moby-Dick* as the "wicked" book Melville said that it is — a blasphemously pessimistic prose-poem on the futility of knowledge, religion, and the American enterprise — collided for me with the idea of using tar to make paintings, and my own long-held and deeply rooted suspicions about the failings of human nature and American culture blossomed darkly in my work at last.

I've long believed that much of the greatest American literature is subversive, that as Leslie Fielding says, "American literature is distinguished by the number of dangerous and disturbing books in its canon — and American scholarship by its ability to conceal this fact" (*Love and Death in the American Novel*, 1966). I like work about what happens when we peek behind the curtain — not just Melville, but Whitman, Hawthorne, Dickinson, Poe, Frost, Gilman, Ginsberg, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Miller, Kerouac, Capote, Tennessee Williams, Sylvia Plath, Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy.… It's their investigations of "the darker angels of our nature" that make our greatest writers essential reading. I've come to see many American visual artists the same way.

Looking further afield, it seems to me the artistic work we tend to save from oblivion mucks around in the depths of nature and human civilization to dredge up what Ezra Pound called "news that stays news," news that is rarely purely "good" but that remains perpetually relevant to our species and our changing times.

* * *

It's been proposed that in every generation, a number of artists coalesce, knowingly or not, around a single significant issue in the history of humanity (or so it appears in hindsight). If so, I believe that for the current generation, that central issue is the Anthropocene, our own human-engineered global geological period. Along with it comes the simultaneous and related teetering

of industrial Western empire amid geo-political chaos, economic disruption, growing nuclear arsenals, resource depletion, overpopulation, massive species extinctions, and the general collapse of the biosphere we evolved (over millions of years!) to inhabit. With any one of these things threatening to do us in, a preoccupation with theory or technique or with producing art with a "pleasing" result can seem utterly pointless. What remains is the will to share the journey in darkness and to stubbornly refute the apparent worthlessness of humanity by proving our character to be made of better stuff.

Melville wasn't writing about the Anthropocene, but in writing about the early signs of disruption already present during its infancy, he presciently loaded *Moby-Dick* with treasure: The attentive reader finds a dark allegory of Western hubris amid parodies of religion and scholarship, reams of speculative philosophy and radical political theory, a send up of whaling as Shakespearean drama, tons of cosmic and religious symbolism,and all presented with lots of wry humor. The central obsession of *Moby-Dick* is modern humanity's fatal flaw: our inability to understand or make peace with nature, ourselves, and each other. In the end, the remorseless quest for dominion comes up against the unknowable, "the inscrutable" as Melville calls it ("The inscrutable is chiefly that which I hate." - Ahab). It's also a book about the pursuit and the limitations of knowledge, and I love it because it's loaded with such a rich abundance of meaning. In this, it is the very model art should follow if it still aspires to major relevance and intrinsic value.

Because make no mistake, despite what science has known for decades, all-powerful fossil fuel conglomerates are ravenously squeezing the last drops of profit from their industry. As always, they're doing so for immediate gain, despite the waking Leviathan that threatens to end multinational consumer capitalism, if not civilization itself, for good and for all.

As evidently Melville already felt in 1850, artists have a responsibility to respond.

* * *

It seems to me that I once broke into a boarded-up whalers' church next to the ocean somewhere out in the Hamptons. I would often be driven "out east" at night by a wild girl I'd met in the undergraduate English program at Stony Brook University. She'd always have a $9 bottle of Freixenet (which she pronounced "Freshenette") or some other cheap wine, and we'd have a glorious drunken time somewhere out there among the dark gray reaches of the Atlantic. As I remember it, this one night we tramped through grassy dunes to an abandoned, boarded-up church, which turned out to have a pulpit shaped like a ship's prow, just like the one Melville describes in *Moby-Dick*. The church's interior was bare, full of dried-out, splintery planks, sand, wind, and the distant pounding of surf. Everything was painted in (faded) black and white.

Apparently, until the late 1900s, Long Island had a lively whaling "fishery." Historians believe American whaling actually began not on Cape Cod but on Long Island (in the mid 1600s) when settlers began coercing indigenous hunters into service by tricking them into debt. There are two whaling museums on the Island, one in Sag Harbor and a smaller in Cold Spring Harbor, which is one town over from where I and my friends grew up. My family moved away from Oyster Bay in my senior year of high school, and thereafter I attended Walt Whitman High School, which is in the town of Melville, possibly named at least in part for Herman, though also, it's said, for the sweetness of the honey (*miele*) it once was famous for (of course, the wildflower fields and honeybees vanished long ago).

I don't know if the story about the abandoned whalers' church really happened. I certainly remember it that way, but it seems there aren't any known whalers' churches on Long Island except the one at Sag Harbor, miles from the Hamptons and grandly restored. Anyway, there have been many violent storms since then, and it's pretty unlikely that something that old and so close to the ocean wouldn't already have been swept away.

- Christopher Volpe
New Hampshire
2021

"On one side hung a very large oil-painting .... such unaccountable masses of shades and shadows....

But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast.

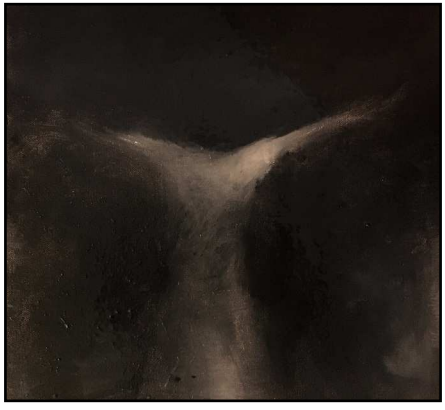
A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted....—It 's the Black Sea in a midnight gale.—It 's the unnatural combat of the four primal elements.—It 's a blasted heath.—It 's a Hyperborean winter scene. —It 's the breaking-up of the ice-bound stream of Time. But... In fact, the artist's design seemed this: The picture represents a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane; the half-foundered ship weltering there with its three dismantled masts alone visible; and an exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads."

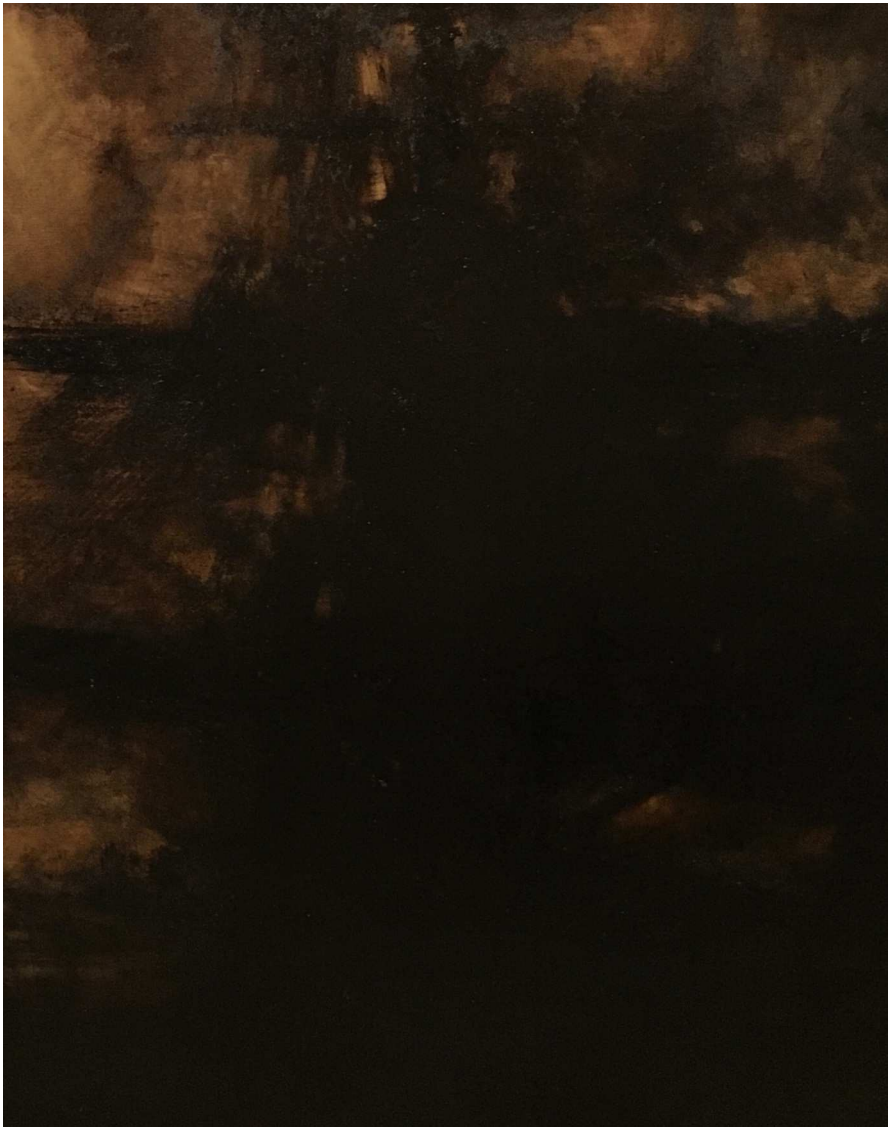
— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 3, "The Spouter Inn."

Purposing to Spring Clean Over the Craft (Painting at the Spouter Inn),
16" x 20," tar and oil on canvas.

"And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye."

— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 85, "The Fountain."

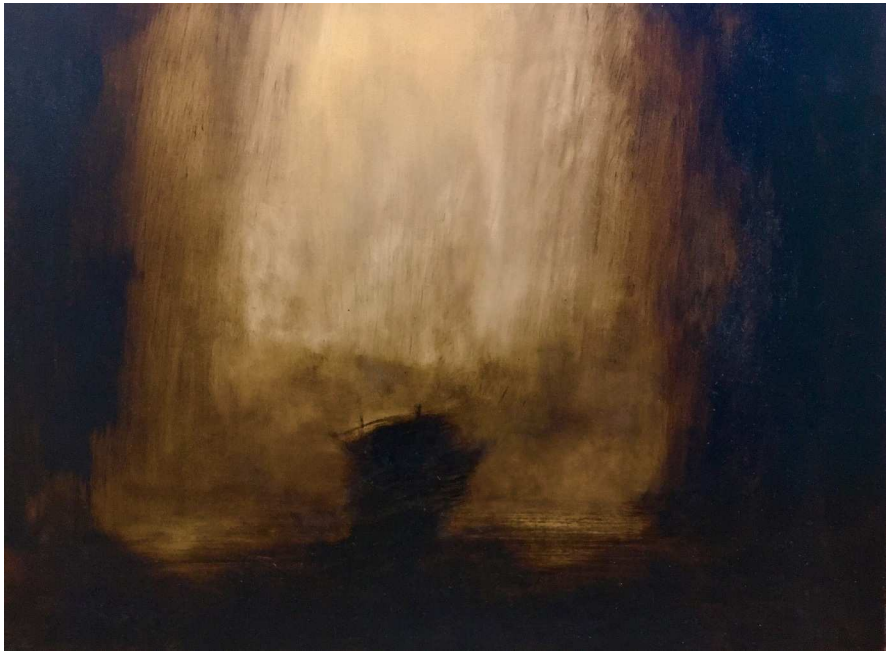




Acushnet (Melville's Whaler), 48" x 36" tar on canvas.
Facing: *Tail*, 12" x 12," tar and oil on canvas.

"I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty."

— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 32, "Cetology."



Any Human Thing, 36" x 48," tar and oil on canvas.

"I heard old Ahab tell him he must always kill a squall, something as they burst a waterspout with a pistol—fire your ship right into it!"

— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 40, "Midnight, Forecastle."

Waterspout, 48" x 48," tar on canvas.

"The moot point is, whether Leviathan can long endure so wide a chase, and so remorseless a havoc; whether he must not at last be exterminated from the waters, and the last whale, like the last man, smoke his last pipe, and then himself evaporate in the final puff."

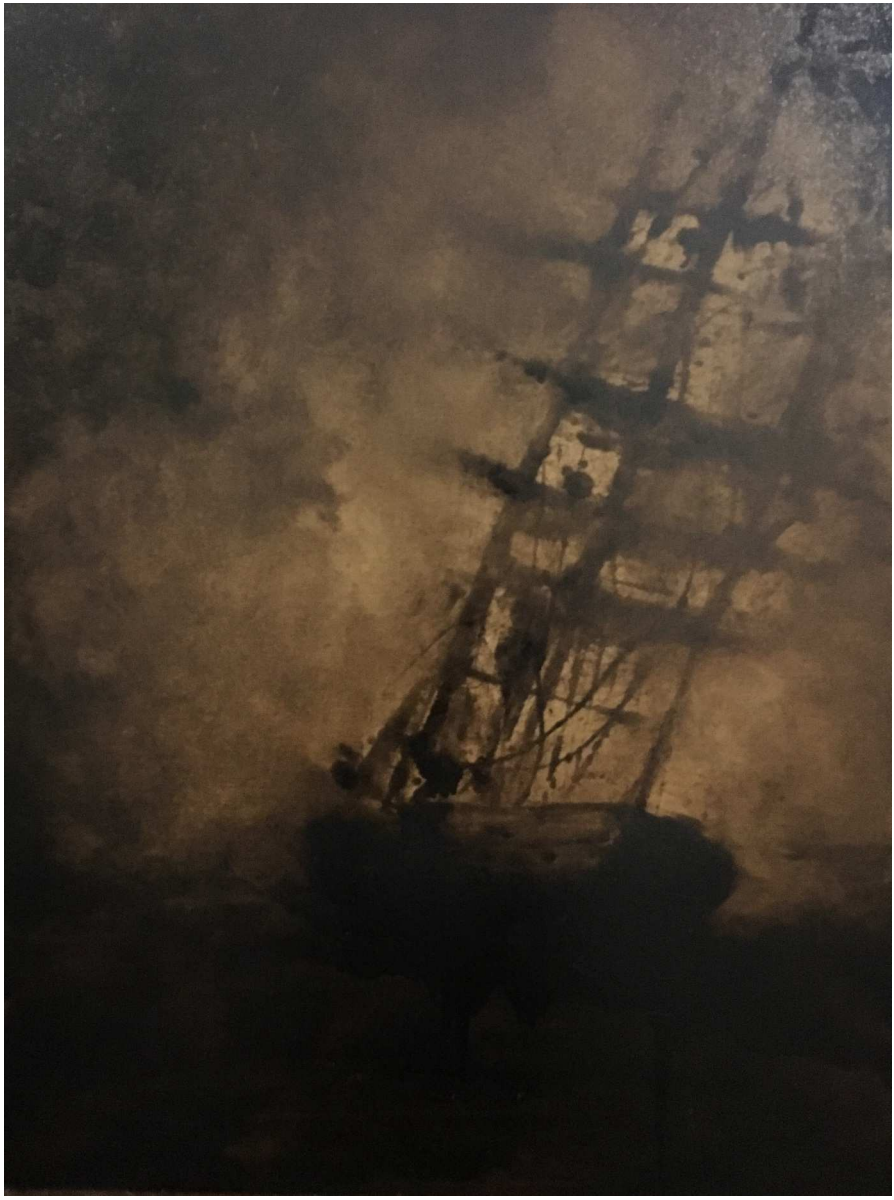
— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 105, "Does the Whale's Magnitude diminish? -- Will he perish?"

Any Human Thing #2 (The Whaler as Derrick), 24" x 24," tar and oil on wood. Facing: *The Whale*, 8" x 8," asphaltum, tar & oil on canvas panel.

"Oh, Ahab! what shall be grand in thee, it must needs be plucked at from the skies, and dived for in the deep, and featured in the unbodied air!"

— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 32,
"The Speksynder."

Dive (Oh, Ahab!), 36" x 48," tar and oil on canvas.



To the Sea (Sou'Wester), 48" x 36," tar on canvas.
Facing: *Flukes*, 24" x 36," tar and oil on canvas.

"Westward the course of empire takes its way;
The first four acts already past,
A fifth shall close the drama with the day;
Time's noblest offspring is the last."

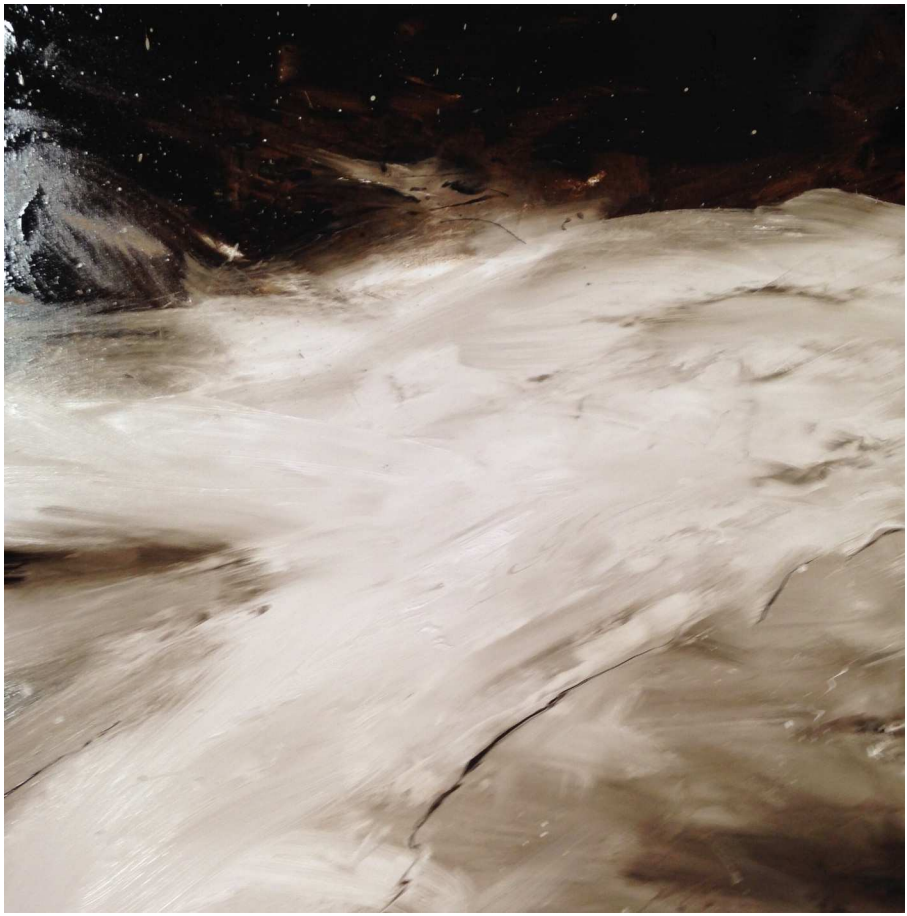
— *George Berkeley,* Verses on the Prospect of
Planting Arts and Learning in America



Westward Nos. I & 2, tar, oil and gold leaf on wood, 16" x 20" and 14" x 20," respectively. Facing: *Westward Nos. 7, 8 & 9,* 8" x 8," tar and gold leaf on wood.

"The muffled rolling of a milky sea; the
rustlings of the festooned frost of mountains;
the desolate shiftings of the
windrowed snows of prairies..."

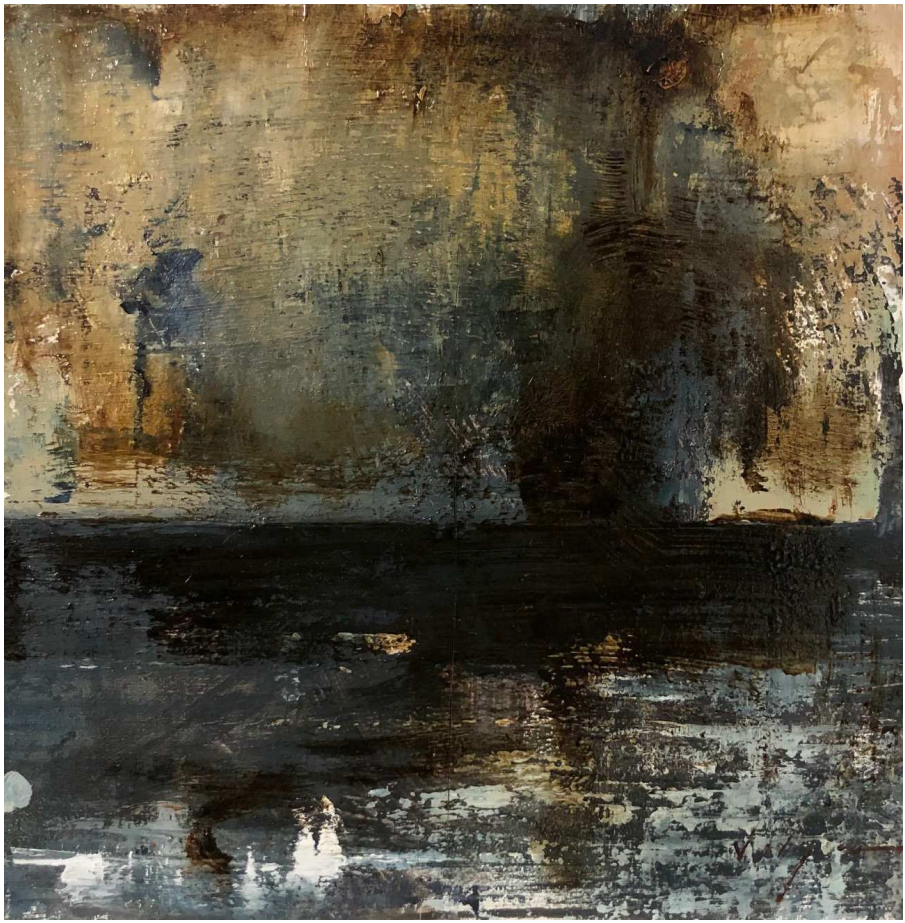
— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 42,
"The Whiteness of the Whale."



The Muffled Rolling of a Milky Sea, 36" x 36," tar and oil on canvas.

"The great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge — pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him."

— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 42,
"The Whiteness of the Whale."



Try-Pots ("The Smoke Rolled Away in Sullen Heaps."), 8" x 8," tar and oil on canvas. Facing: *Monumental White Shroud*, 22" x 18," tar & oil on canvas.

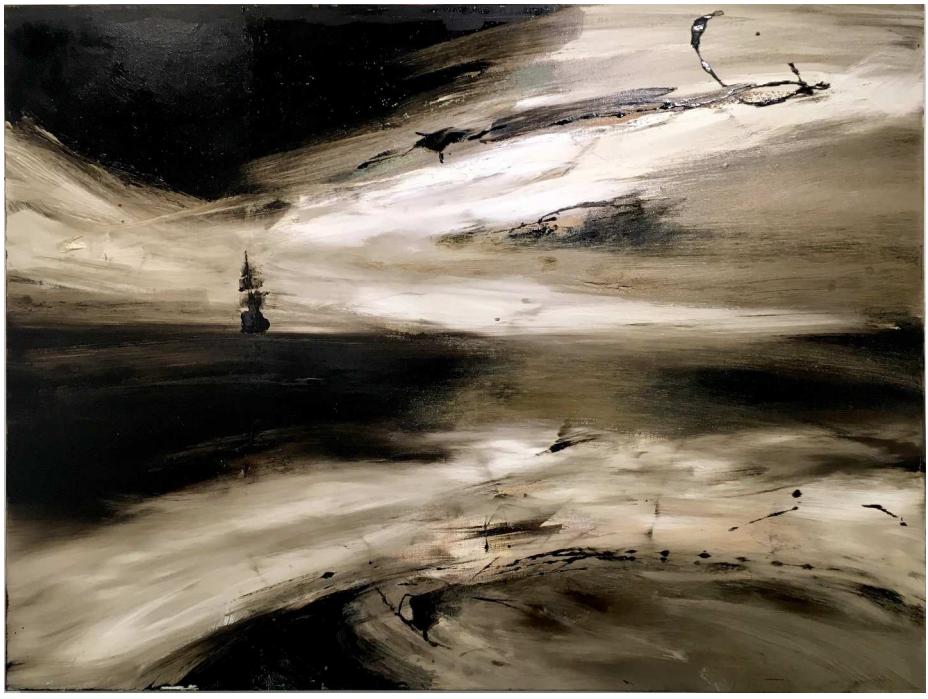
"Oh, thou foundling fire, thou hermit immemorial, thou too hast thy incommunicable riddle, thy unparticipated grief. Here again with haughty agony, I read my sire. Leap! leap up, and lick the sky! I leap with thee; I burn with thee; would fain be welded with thee; defyingly I worship thee!"

— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 119,
"The Candles."

The Corpusants, 12" x 12," tar, oil, gold leaf on canvas.
Facing: *Any Human Thing* (detail).

"Ahab commanded the t'gallant sails and royals to be set, and every stunsail spread. The best man in the ship must take the helm. Then, with every mast-head manned, the piled-up craft rolled down before the wind. The strange, upheaving, lifting tendency of the taffrail breeze filling the hollows of so many sails, made the buoyant, hovering deck to feel like air beneath the feet; while still she rushed along, as if two antagonistic influences were struggling in her—one to mount direct to heaven, the other to drive yawningly to some horizontal goal."

— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 51,
"The Spirit-Spout."



T'Gallant Sails, 36" x 48," Tar and Oil on Canvas.

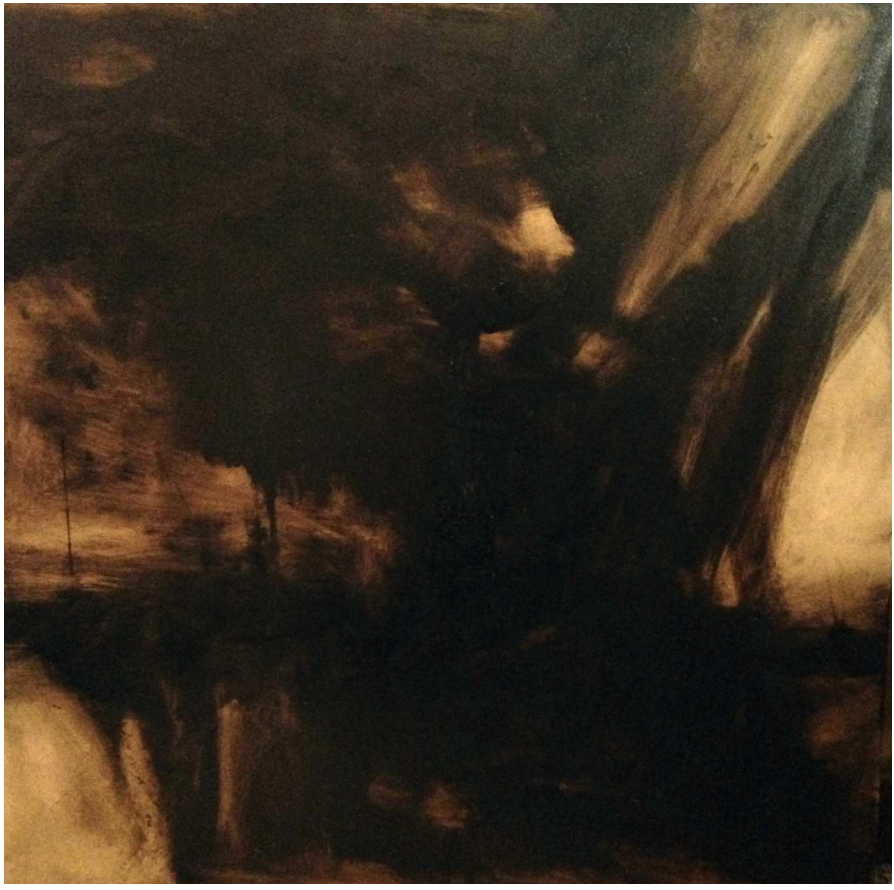
"An everlasting terra incognita . . . a foe to man who is an alien to it. . . . No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe."

— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 58, "Brit."

Horizon Sails, tar and oil on canvas, 30" x 24"
Facing: *Purposing to Spring Clean Over the Craft (Painting at the Spouter Inn) #2*, 16" x 20," tar and oil on canvas.

"It is not down in any map; true places never are."

— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 12,
"Biographical."



True Places, 48" x 48," tar and oil on canvas.
Facing: *True Places #2*, 16" x 24," tar and oil on wood.

"Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all."

— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 1, "Loomings."

Surely All This is Not Without Meaning, 48" x 60," tar and oil on canvas
Facing: *Cape Horner Nos. 1 & 2,* 10" x 20," tar and oil on wood

"Yes, the world 's a ship on its passage out."

— *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 8, "The Pulpit."

Argonautica (Dutchman), 48" x 48," tar on canvas.
Facing: *Westward #2* (detail).

Redeeming Darkness

On Making Art in a Difficult Time

Why make art if there isn't going to be a civilization to receive it?

What kind of art would be worth making if human extinction in say, 30 years, were certain? The evidence is clear that we are living in the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch resulting from human intervention in the biosphere. We are causing the planet's "sixth great extinction" by steadily generating the conditions that have already eliminated 50-90%+ of *all* life on earth five times in the past. We can't seem to stop destroying individual lives, local populations, and entire species in unprecedented numbers, threatening the fundamental social and ecological systems that make life on earth possible.

In short, humanity on many fronts appears to be sabotaging itself more efficiently than ever. It is the central issue of our age and the most serious problem in human history. How will artists respond?

As a public act (which it becomes as soon as it's shown), art has a moral dimension. As Shelley says, "A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own." Past fear, anger, and mourning, one way out of paralysis is to create on behalf of human potential alone. In a dark time, only the highest ideals matter.

Art's role is to elevate humankind. It's that grandiose and that simple. This means, among many other things, that art's essential value lies not in entertaining, educating, or consoling humanity. Rather, art *redeems* humanity by addressing itself to the best of which humanity is capable. This has always been the case, but never has it been more necessary to cultivate this way of making.

When we finish a dark book like *Moby-Dick* in which everyone, good and bad, except the "orphaned" narrator dies a horrible death, why don't we feel depressed? Why do we actually feel something like the opposite - deeply satisfied, enlightened in every sense, and elated enough to

recommend the book and to reread it again and again? A facet of Aristotelian catharsis: the redeeming power of darkness.

Art recycles a culture's toxins, sometimes literally. The greatest lyricism is tuned to the deepest mystery. Art finds renewed strength and vital relevance by facing up and calling attention to the darkness of meaninglessness itself. It redeems individuals, cultural bodies, and by its refusal to look away from the awful possibility of near-term human extinction, it can redeem even our self-destructive folly. The only security is one's ability to produce something of value - if not for oneself or for the tribe, then *for the sake of what human beings are capable of.*

After all, the only guarantee of any measure of happiness we have ever really had is the invigoration of the pursuit and the joy of producing work driven by convictions worth pursuing. To do so is to rediscover the making of art not as a pastime, a career choice, an activism for change or social justice, or a way of generating money or fame, but as a calling, a line to the secret underlying all things that only devotional attitudes can approach.

There's no time for anything but the most serious kind of play.

If separation from nature is at the root of our unraveling, the solution lies in reconnection and embrace. The answer to the climate crisis is for each of us to connect personally at a deeper level of awareness with the natural world and with each other. It means being honest about our own suffering, being willing to see the suffering of others, and bearing witness to the suffering of the world. As Heidegger reminds us, "the closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine, and the more questioning do we become." (*The Question Concerning Technology*)

"The eternal equilibrium of things is great,
And the eternal overthrow of things is great,
And there is another paradox."
(Walt Whitman 1855)

"When we finish a dark book like *Moby-Dick* in which everyone, good and bad (except the “orphaned” narrator), dies a horrible death, why don’t we feel depressed? Why do we actually feel something like the opposite - deeply satisfied, enlightened in every sense, and elated enough to recommend the book and to reread it again and again? A facet of Aristotelian catharsis: the redeeming power of darkness."

- from Redeeming Darkness:
On Making Art in a Difficult Time

“Christopher Volpe’s paintings are stark conduits of the inherent oppositions between human beings and the natural world.”
- Art New England

Christopher Volpe's *Loomings* paintings combine liquefied coal tar, oil paint, and gold leaf. The series is named after the first chapter in Melville’s *Moby-Dick,* and each painting’s title pointedly references the book's apocalyptic vision of the American quest. Recalling that whale oil was the precursor to petroleum, the foreboding maritime imagery and the industrial medium's metallic blacks, tintype grays, and sepia tones, invoke Melville's novel as a cautionary, foundational myth for our own age of accelerating climate change and social disruption. This selection pairs evocative works from the series with excerpts from *Moby-Dick.*

Christopher Volpe is an artist, writer, and teacher who was born and raised on Long Island. He currently lives in New Hampshire.