

Art as Ecotone

by Rowland S. Russell, PhD

For over 40 years I've been inspired and illuminated by Greg's art. Moreover, I have been significantly informed by our engaging and creative friendship. When we first met in the dorms at State University of New York at Binghamton in 1976, I had no idea how deeply our lives would intertwine. Though we only intersected there for one year before Greg moved back to New York City to complete his studies, our connection carried over through many passages and across many locales.

Over the years, Greg and I have explored together a diverse range of landscapes, including the White Mountains of New Hampshire, Strathcona Park in British Columbia, Seattle and the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State, Joshua Tree National Park in California, Northern New Mexico, West Texas and Eastern Oregon often accompanied by his wife, the painter Janet Morgan. On every excursion, Greg made art, sketching in his journal, setting up to paint a scene. I really got to witness his practice as a "plein air" artist when I was privileged to join Greg and Janet on two separate artists-in-residences at Death Valley National park as a guest writer.

But the landscapes I have shared most deeply with Greg have been the wilds of New York City. When I relocated back east from a dozen years living in Washington State, my Western friends commiserated with me over longing for the many wilderness areas I had grown to love out there. "When I really miss wilderness" I joked, "I'll head to the last true wilderness on the East Coast – New York!" Noted author Barry Lopez once told me that if one wanted to truly learn about ecology, they should spend time in New York City. Over countless long walks and city-scape explorations, Greg and I have explored these notions of urban wilderness and city ecology, as artists and as naturalists, both of which draw deeply on close attention to detail and recognition of nuance, and benefit from constant practice and meticulous research.

Whether he's portraying quiet scenes from Brooklyn's Prospect Park or the Botanical Gardens, intriguing remnants of New York's varied industry (grain silos, cement plants, cranes, piers), large or small scale architectural details (bridges, buildings, brownstone stoops), poignant scenes from the neighborhood or engaging vignettes of people enjoying the city, Greg's paintings invariably carry meticulous details that resonate deeply on emotional, philosophical and political planes.

In natural history, an ecotone is a place where different plant and animal communities overlap. Such a zone is inclusive of organisms from each region, but gives rise to diverse life forms that are not found in either separate place. In ecology, an ecotone is characterized by unique and unexpected qualities of life. For me, Greg's life and art function as a creative ecotone; offering a unique vision that incorporates the depth of human experience of urban architecture, history and culture as well as wild and elemental nature, with vitality not present in either genre apart from the other. There is also a kind of ecotone that exists between our inner selves and outer worlds. Greg's work speaks eloquently to the complex relationships people have with their places; figures in his paintings are telling us stories if we have eyes to discern them.

As a writer of natural history and scholar of 'sense of place' literature, I feel Greg's paintings - both urban and wilderness subjects - evoke a unique and deeply felt sense of the human experience of place. In both his life and his art, Greg transcends the dichotomies between city and wild places. He is able to draw from one to sustain and inform the other, resulting in a deeper experience of both. It is art which celebrates paradox; embracing apparently contradictory themes without needing to resolve the tension between them.

I fear the rift of values between wilderness and urban places is one which potentially threatens the fabric of society. A number of his paintings are set along waterfront that due to the potential impact of climate change and rising sea levels may not be present a generation from now if we are not able to transform our extractive relationship with the planet that sustains us into a more collaborative one. Greg's accurate and impassioned work in each realm transcends the divide that isolates us from the places that sustain us. His art shows us that love and respect for beauty in place is to be celebrated wherever we are.

Rowland S. Russell, PhD

Rowland has combined writing, art, music, teaching, mentoring and consulting into a multifaceted career. In his studies in natural history and ecology, he's found the inspiration and wisdom that informs his creative process, professional practice, and spiritual discipline.