

Katri Pyy

Colours of the Forest

Exploring gathering and watercolour-making processes

Throughout my process, it was clear that I wanted to observe and experiment with Nordic flora that connects the landscape we experienced on the High Coast with my own experiences in Finnish nature. In my process, I connect the traditions of paint-making and natural dyes, trying to formulate ways to extract colour from organic materials found in nature.

One thing combining my family since my childhood has been berry picking at our cottage. My enthusiasm for berry picking has been the starting point of my journey into other natural materials and how I can incorporate them into my art process. I have used materials I have gathered to make watercolour paints with many trials and errors.


Paints and Dyes

The process of paint-making has evolved throughout human history. What gives paint its colour is the source of pigment, which can be organic, mineral or synthetic. The sources of my colour are all organic materials gathered from surrounding nature, processing them in a way that the end resulting powder can be combined with watercolour binder. The same kind of watercolour binder base with Arabic gum and honey I used was invented in the 1700s by William Reeves (Finlay V. 2004). My modern version of this includes honey, Arabic gum,

clove oil, glycerol and hot water, and it preserves its use on multiple occasions.

The science of mixing paint colours was a respected field, notably in the Middle Ages when artists learnt it as they started as apprentices. This changed already in the middle of the 1600s when the task was appointed to a separate paint mixer (Finlay, 2004), and even more when synthetic dyes were invented and became common since the 1850's (Sundström 2002). Artists have been separated in many ways from this process, which is now dictated by the easiness of the modern world.

Today, in Western society, paint-making is seen more as a hobby that some artists take part in and is usually done with store-bought mineral-based pigments. For me, taking part in the plant-based paint-making process is a conscious choice to get closer to the materials and to be more present in the sustainable actions we take in our landscape.





*Figures 1 and 2. During fieldweek, I started to gather my materials, beginning mostly with lichen and moss. The process for different materials may vary, with the first steps being either drying or soaking material and then boiling the dye colour out in a pot.
Images: Katri Pyy, 2023.*

Gathering and Dwelling in Landscapes

During our field week on the High Coast, I found it fascinating that almost everyone took part in gathering some kind of natural material in one way or another, many using it in their artistic projects. Gathering seems to have an attraction to human behaviour that awakens when you see something aesthetically appealing or useful you have been looking for.

Gathering is a personal experience that has traditional survival knowledge related to collecting nourishment or what kind of applications these natural materials have in the sense of medicine, craftsmanship or other. The term taskscape (Ingold, 1993) by Tim Ingold has been with us during the whole LiLa experience, and it embodies those activities in which we take part in our daily

landscape. For me, my gathering journeys became my taskscape, as well as my study of sustainable handling and my knowledge of natural materials. Some of these activities started as part of this project, but I see an interest in what nature has to offer as a mindset that you interact with in your daily life.

Whilst dwelling in my outings, I focused on what the flora had to offer for my cause but also on how I am able to be most respectful in my gatherings. What I am gathering, in what type of manner and in what quantities, all its effects on the ecosystem of the forest in which I am gathering. These decisions should be conscious of making the most sustainable acts in the landscape I am affecting.

This also shapes the way we view acceptable ways of

gathering and what we find culturally supported. I found gathering in a mindful way to increase my environmental sensibility—how I observe and sense the environment in which I am. Even in my day-to-day life, I pay more attention to the plants, trees and mushrooms living on the side of the roads.

Within my summer, I saw seasons change and I paid attention as nature woke up in the spring—to the glory of growth and wilting as we neared the fall. This reminded me of Tim Ingold's (1993) ideas in 'The Temporality of the Landscape' regarding how changing and transient our experiences with our surroundings are. The passage of time and seasons shapes how we interact with our landscape and the environment is constantly changing as a result of those and human activities. I may not encounter the same flora in the same place next summer, nor is my perception the same.



Working With Natural Materials

Going into the field week, I got the idea of how I wanted to create paints out of natural materials, and my first attempt with a binder was with different berry powders. With my tests at home after field week, I tried handling mushrooms, polypores, pinecones, berries, flower pedals and plant leaves.

Natural colours are unexpected, as the result is dependent on what colouring substance the material emits, which changes depending on the age of the specimen. The second part is how the colour changes and holds in the factors whilst making solutions, such as pretreatment or processing afterwards, heat and Ph level or using mordants.

I found that yellow was the most common colour to extract from the plants, but it was harder to maintain in the last step to dry powder form. I succeeded in many beautiful brown results, and it is said that brown and yellow are the most common colours in our nature being used textile dyeing practices also (Sundström, 2002). Green is all around us, but the colourants in a plant are consistent on many variables and some of them do not dissolve into water as you would expect.

For a successful result, it was a requirement that the colourant be water-dissolvable and be able to dry as a powder. Some attempts ended up sticky, as the drying process was unsuccessful. The colourant also had to be highly saturated. I concluded that my method had too high heat for many of those, and I started to monitor the lower heat in the drying process with more success.

Figure 3. Birch leaves at the end of boiling. With some attempts, I also dyed watercolour papers, and many of those succeeded in dyeing beautiful colours in those but were too subtle. Image: Katri Pyy, 2023.



Figure 4. Boiling gilled polypore and tinder polypore.
Image: Katri Pyy, 2023.

Conclusion

My process consisted of practical attempts to learn about colours in the surrounding nature. These colours tell the story of long-lasting traditions of different species being used over time. Painting with these final colours is not the same as painting with store-bought watercolours. You experience the natural smell of material and get diverse consistencies whilst you are painting. I embraced having to use a limited colour range, using mostly cold and warm brownish colours and mixing them with yellows and blueberry blues. I liked how thick the paint could get and how dark I managed to get some of them.

Every plant ended up with different properties, and my favourite was how charcoal, like my black alder pine paint, ended up. In my process, I also had the opportunity to share knowledge communally. Talking about my progress, I found that everybody had some natural material knowledge that they wanted to share, which also brought me new things to try. My artistic journey of bringing my experiences in the forest to paper required me to be more patient and focused on a new way of interacting with my surrounding nature.

References

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