

## **Reimagining Our Backyard: Looking at the Muddy River**

### **Project Description:**

My hope with this project is to deepen my work with students in our painting unit, both in terms of skill but also subject matter. In terms of skill building, I plan to study with painter Nancy McCarthy at the MassArt New England workshops in Boston, this summer 2025. Nancy's work as a painter and as a keen observer of light and color in the natural world are interesting to me because she approaches the picture plane through a deep understanding of color and shape, translating what she sees in her environment and commenting on the nuances of the natural world in the process. The workshops will be held at Massachusetts College of Art and Design this year and I am happy that they will be so close to our school neighborhood because I can use the Fenway and the Muddy River as my subject matter. The scientific nature of looking at landscape at a particular time of day and specific season transforms the observation process into shape, color and form, and I am confident I will learn a lot from Nancy.

In our sophomore and junior years, Studio Art students create a series of paintings based on their observations of the Fenway. As tenth graders in June, we have started with roses in the Kelleher Rose Garden, working on our brush technique, color mixing and observation. When students return in the fall, we have gone to the Fenway gardens to gather painted sketches for their final garden monster paintings, which combine both observed and imagined elements. Students work with the metaphor of a monster as a way of communicating a bigger idea of the "monsters" that we encounter in our daily lives.

I want to evolve this unit, from the cultivated gardens to the wilder land of the Fens and the Muddy River, recording it in its light and season similar to how Nancy McCarthy records her environment. In the act of prolonged observation, students will quiet themselves and become part of the habitat, and then begin the process of careful observation with drawing. They do this practice at the MFA and other museums, and my plan is to transfer this skill from drawing to paint in the outdoor world that they walk through every day. As a teacher, I have seen the dramatic transformation of the Muddy River over the past two decades and how it has improved the neighborhood, becoming more sustainable for generations to come. For the first time ever, students are pointing out great blue heron and turtles on

our walks to and from the MFA. Through this experience of observing and recording a small slice of their local world, I hope to convey the purpose of stewardship and how artists can illuminate and uplift the work of scientists by just quieting themselves and observing, recording what they see dynamically in layered color and shape.

I became interested in invasive species because of my own gardening efforts in my backyard. We have invasive Norway Maples, which crowd and eliminate any native ground cover. I started to research other invasives and their effects on native species, like the common reed and cattails, and have illustrated this in linoleum prints and handmade books. Part of the effort in the Muddy River was removing a massive amount of common reed that had grown over decades. I have reached out to the Muddy River Restoration Project and am in conversation with one of the leads of this project to come and speak with us about the work that has and is being done in our school's neighborhood. I am interested in connecting how artists move through their creative process (research, ideation, iteration, creation, refining, reflection) with how scientists envisioned and moved through a specific process in order to achieve a sustainable and restored landscape.

For my own work, I have attended workshops led by Dr. Banu Subramaniam on the colonization of seeds to continue my research in my own studio, and hope to do a similar art/science connection for students based on this field work. Ultimately, I believe deepening students' recognition and understanding of a sustainable ecosystem near us and the work that has been done to restore our school's neighborhood delivers a strong message of hope for how we all—including artists— can be climate activists right in our own backyard.

### **Goals of the Project:**

1. Improve my observational painting skills by taking a workshop with Nancy McCarthy at MassArt.
2. Apply the skills to our painting unit, and focus on the Muddy River.
3. Connect the work of artists to the work of scientists by inviting a scientist to speak with us about the life of the Muddy River.
4. A future goal is to connect to our own biology teachers for a possible collaboration/overlap in the sophomore year.

### **Summary of Project:**

1. Take a painting course with Nancy McCarthy at the Mass Art New England workshop.
2. Develop an observational painting unit based on the ecology and naturalism of the Muddy River and surrounding area that includes:
  - a. Scaffolded observational paintings
  - b. Muddy River research and meet with a Muddy River Restoration Project scientist
  - c. Monster Research
  - d. Metaphor lesson
  - e. Final landscape piece with a metaphorical monster
3. Exhibit our paintings at the final junior exhibition in January 2026.

**Timeline of Project:**

1. July 2025: Take painting class with Nancy McCarthy
2. August 2025: Curriculum planning
3. September 2025: Muddy River Monster Painting Unit
4. December 2025: Share Project with Community
5. January 2026: Studio Art 3 (junior) Exhibition