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Natural Material Exploration in Contemporary Fine Art Studio Practices within Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the exploration of natural materials within contemporary fine art studio practice at higher education institutions. The study focuses on how practice-based experimentation involving organic substances can contribute to teaching, learning, and artistic development within fine art education. Through studio-based research, the study investigates the use of materials such as charcoal, soil, coffee, tea, turmeric, leaves, wood, and food colouring as alternatives to conventional industrial media in contemporary painting practice. The research employed a practice-based methodology involving material experimentation, observation, reflective analysis, and gestural mark-making processes. Findings indicate that natural materials possess strong aesthetic, conceptual, and pedagogical potential in producing expressive abstract landscapes while simultaneously encouraging environmental awareness and sustainable artistic approaches among fine art students and researchers. The study also demonstrates how experimentation with unconventional materials can strengthen critical inquiry, creativity, and material sensitivity within studio-based learning environments. Ultimately, the research contributes to contemporary fine art discourse by expanding alternative approaches to painting practice, material exploration, and studio pedagogy within tertiary art education.

Keywords: *Contemporary Painting, Fine Art, Higher Education Institutions, Natural Materials, Studio Practices*

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1 INTRODUCTION

The development of contemporary fine art education in higher education institutions increasingly emphasizes studio-based experimentation, conceptual inquiry, and material innovation as important components of artistic learning (Pavlou, 2024; Legino et al., 2025). Within contemporary fine art programmes, painting practices have expanded beyond technical mastery toward critical engagement with sustainability, environmental awareness, and alternative artistic methodologies (Abdullah et al., 2024). In this context, the exploration of natural materials has emerged as an important approach in strengthening contemporary studio practice among fine art students and researchers in higher education institutions (Sulaiman et al., 2025). The use of organic substances such as charcoal, soil, coffee, tea, turmeric, leaves, and food colouring provides opportunities for experimental image-making while simultaneously encouraging ecological awareness and sustainable artistic practices (Dewey, 2024).

This study focuses specifically on how natural material experimentation can contribute to contemporary fine art studio practice within higher education institutions. The research investigates how practice-based experimentation involving natural substances can expand students' understanding

of materiality, gesture, abstraction, and conceptual development in painting. Within the context of fine art education in higher education institutions, contemporary studio practice increasingly emphasizes experimentation, material exploration, and conceptual development as essential components of artistic learning (Mohamed & Kamel, 2024). In fine art programmes, painting is not only understood as a technical discipline but also as a platform for critical inquiry, environmental awareness, and visual research (Sarkar, 2020). Therefore, the exploration of alternative materials and unconventional approaches has become increasingly relevant in expanding contemporary studio practices among fine art students and researchers (Zhang & Shen, 2024).

This study positions itself within the context of fine art practice in higher education institutions by examining how natural materials can function as alternative artistic media in studio-based learning and artistic experimentation. The research contributes to contemporary discussions surrounding materiality, environmental consciousness, and experimental painting approaches within tertiary art education. Contemporary painting practices increasingly explore the relationship between materiality, environmental awareness, and conceptual expression (Sarkar & Blaney, 2023). Within studio-based research, artists continuously investigate alternative approaches that challenge conventional artistic methods and industrial materials (Nikolaidou, 2023). In this context, this study examines the construction of chaotic abstract landscapes through natural materials in exploring the concept of decayed and destroyed nature.

The research emerged from prolonged experimentation within studio practice and direct engagement with surrounding environments. Nature became the primary source of inspiration in both conceptual and technical development (Katiyar et al., 2021). The study focused on replacing industrial painting materials with naturally sourced substances collected from everyday surroundings. Materials such as soil, charcoal, coffee, tea, turmeric, chili powder, leaves, twigs, wood, and food colouring were integrated into the painting process to construct expressive abstract landscapes. The issue of environmental destruction, deforestation, illegal logging, and ecological instability in Malaysia became central conceptual concerns within the research (Noor et al., 2020). The visual language of destruction was translated through layered textures, spontaneous mark-making, gestural movement, and natural colour reactions generated during the drying process (Miller, 2021). The accidental behaviour of natural materials contributed significantly to the formation of unstable and chaotic visual surfaces (Namdari, 2020).

This study also draws from personal experiences with camping and survival activities in natural environments. These experiences encouraged improvisation and adaptation using available natural materials. Such encounters transformed the understanding of material value and shifted the artist's dependency away from industrial art media. The study also reflects the importance of studio-based experimentation within fine art education, particularly in encouraging students and researchers to engage critically with material processes, environmental issues, and artistic innovation. Through the integration of natural materials into painting practice, the research demonstrates how fine art education in higher education institutions can expand beyond conventional industrial media toward more sustainable and conceptually driven artistic approaches.

2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To construct abstract landscape paintings using natural materials as alternatives to conventional industrial media in responding to destructive environmental issues.
2. To experiment with natural substances such as spices, soil, charcoal, leaves, and food colouring in generating new visual meanings within studio practice.
3. To investigate the role of bodily movement, hand gestures, and spontaneous mark-making in constructing expressive compositions.

The objectives were developed specifically within the context of fine art studio practice in higher education institutions, where experimentation, conceptual inquiry, and material exploration are emphasized as important pedagogical components in contemporary painting education.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Expressionism and Emotional Landscape

Expressionism significantly informed the visual and conceptual direction of this research. Expressionist art emphasizes emotional intensity, gestural movement, psychological expression, and subjective interpretation rather than realistic representation (Green, 2024; Roberts, 2023). Within this framework, painting becomes a medium for expressing emotional responses toward environmental and social realities (Papavasileiou, 2021).

The use of aggressive brushstrokes, layered surfaces, distorted imagery, and spontaneous compositions within expressionist practices influenced the development of chaotic abstract landscapes in this study (Patron, 2023; Baloch et al., 2024; Yu, 2025). The works of Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch demonstrated how landscapes could communicate emotional tension and psychological instability (Morrell, 2020). Their influence contributed to the understanding that landscape painting could function beyond representation and instead communicate emotional and conceptual narratives (Liaqat & Abbas, 2023).

3.2 Artist References

3.2.1 Anselm Kiefer

The works of Anselm Kiefer significantly influenced the material and conceptual direction of this study. His use of soil, ash, cement, and industrial materials demonstrates how materiality can embody destruction, trauma, and memory (Lopes, 2020). The artist's heavily textured surfaces and monumental compositions inspired the exploration of layered destructive landscapes within this research. Furthermore, the emphasis on dark tonalities, rough surfaces, and decaying textures informed the application of natural pigments and organic substances in constructing landscapes that evoke deterioration and instability (Jedlińska, 2020). Kiefer's experimental approach to materiality also encouraged the integration of unconventional materials into contemporary painting practices, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1 *Nigredo – Morgenthau* by Anselm Kiefer (2012), acrylic, emulsion, oil, and shellac on photograph mounted on canvas, 190.02 x 380.05 cm (Source: Micchelli, 2025)

3.2.2 Latiff Mohidin

Latiff Mohidin's landscape paintings also contributed significantly to the understanding of expressive landscape construction. His energetic brushstrokes, rhythmic compositions, and atmospheric colour control demonstrated how landscapes can embody emotional and spiritual qualities (Chow & Abdullah, 2024). Mohidin's approach to abstraction and expressive mark-making informed the gestural qualities explored within this study. Furthermore, the use of rough textures and expressive movement in his paintings reinforced the importance of bodily engagement and spontaneous gestures in producing emotionally charged landscapes (Sabapathy, 2020), as illustrated in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2 *Gelombang Rimba* by Latiff Mohidin (1995), Oil on canvas, 137 x 167.5 cm (Source: KL Lifestyle Art Space, n.d.)

3.3 Natural Materials and Artistic Experimentation

Within fine art education, experimentation with unconventional materials has become increasingly important in encouraging creative exploration and critical thinking among students (Samaniego et al., 2024). Studio-based learning environments in higher education institutions often emphasize the importance of process-oriented practice, where experimentation and failure contribute to artistic discovery and conceptual development (Ryan et al., 2025). The exploration of natural materials within this study aligns with contemporary fine art pedagogical approaches that encourage students to challenge conventional artistic methods and investigate sustainable material practices (Fan, 2025).

The use of natural materials has existed throughout human civilization, particularly within prehistoric cave paintings and traditional art practices (Purkat et al., 2026). Early societies utilized charcoal, earth pigments, and plant-based dyes to communicate narratives and record experiences (Sarkar et al., 2022). This historical relationship between art and nature informed the present study's exploration of organic substances (Tribot et al., 2022). Materials such as turmeric, coffee, tea, chili powder, charcoal, and food colouring were selected due to their textural properties, unstable reactions, and symbolic associations with transformation and decay (Bashir et al., 2024). Their unpredictable behaviour during drying processes contributed significantly to the conceptual framework of destruction (Pandiselvam et al., 2022). The study also contributes to fine art studio pedagogy by demonstrating how environmental issues and material experimentation can be integrated into artistic research within higher education institutions.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Practice-Based Research

This study employed a practice-based research methodology centred on studio experimentation, observation, material exploration, and reflective analysis. Artistic production functioned simultaneously as creative practice and knowledge generation. The methodology evolved progressively through continuous experimentation with natural substances and the observation of their reactions on different surfaces. The study documented material changes, drying effects, colour transformations, and accidental outcomes generated throughout the creative process. The overall research methodology employed a practice-based research approach, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

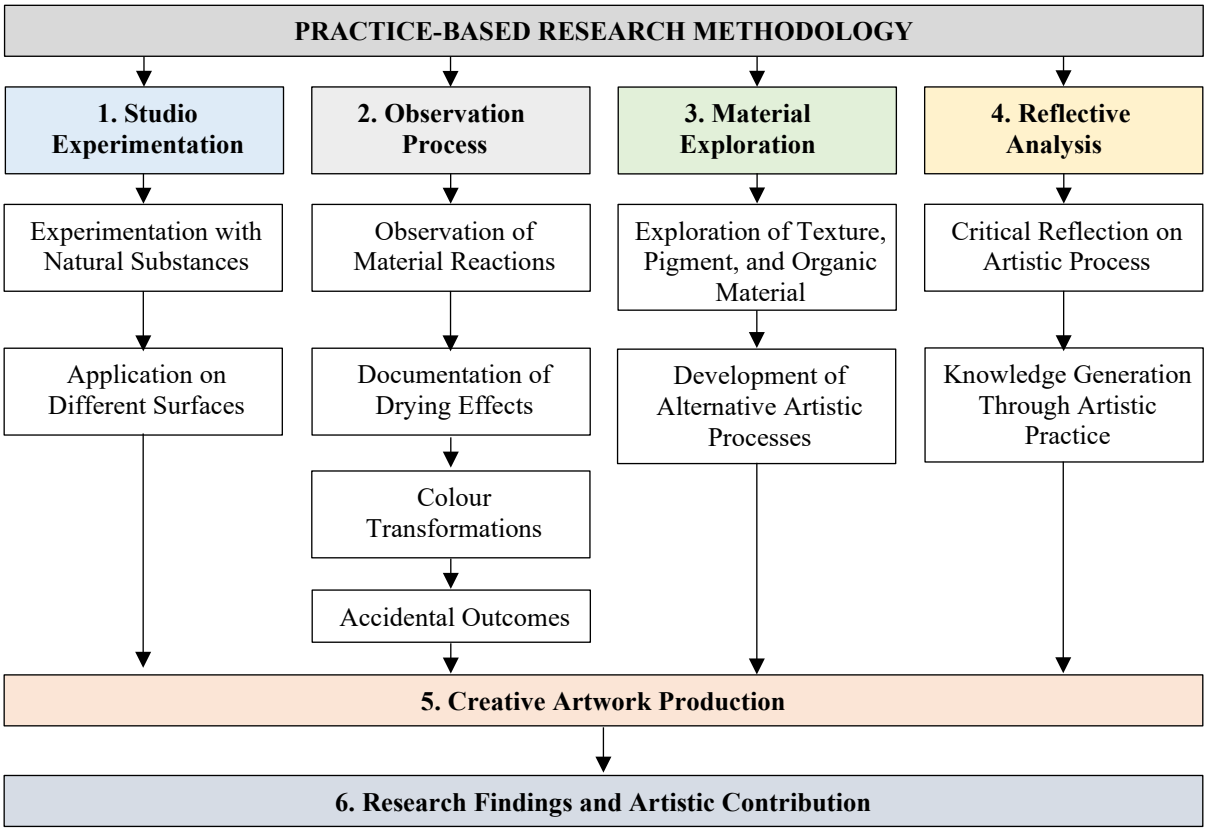


Figure 3 Framework of Practice-Based Research Methodology in the Study (Source: Adapted from Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Sullivan, 2010; Gray & Malins, 2016)

4.2 Material Exploration

Various natural materials were explored on surfaces such as canvas, paper, calico fabric, glass bottles, and aluminium. Materials used throughout the study included charcoal, soil, coffee powder, tea residue, turmeric powder, chili powder, leaves, twigs, wood, food colouring, and PVA glue. The purpose of experimentation was to identify the aesthetic potential, textural qualities, and conceptual possibilities of each material, as illustrated in Figure 4 below.



Figure 4 Process of Exploring Various Natural Materials in the Study

4.3 Gesture and Mark-Making

The study emphasized bodily engagement and gestural movement during painting production. Sweeping, rubbing, scratching, sprinkling, pouring, and layering methods were integrated into the creative process. Large working surfaces enabled aggressive gestures and spontaneous interaction between body, material, and surface, as illustrated in Figure 5 below.



Figure 5 Process of Gesture and Mark-Making in the Study

5 STUDIO DEVELOPMENT AND EXPERIMENTATION

5.1 Practice-Based Research

The early stage of the study focused on recording textures derived from dead wood collected from various locations. Inspired by the Japanese Gyotaku printing technique, charcoal was used to transfer wood textures onto calico fabric surfaces. The rubbing process generated layered marks resembling damaged landscapes and deteriorating environments. These early experiments established the foundation for subsequent explorations involving texture, destruction, and natural mark-making.

5.2 Transition from Industrial to Natural Materials

During the second stage of the research, industrial materials such as oil paint and bitumen were combined with natural substances. However, the artist gradually shifted away from industrial media after recognizing the expressive and conceptual potential of natural materials. Natural substances generated unstable textures, accidental stains, and unpredictable reactions that aligned closely with the conceptual theme of environmental destruction.

5.3 Experimentation with Turmeric, Coffee, and Food Colouring

One of the major developments within the study involved experimentation with food-based pigments and spices. Turmeric produced vibrant yellow textures, while coffee and tea generated sepia and dark brown surfaces resembling soil and burnt landscapes. Food colouring introduced unstable pigments that shifted and transformed during drying processes. These accidental reactions contributed to chaotic compositions and expressive abstract surfaces.

5.4 COVID-19 and Creative Adaptation

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the studio process. Restricted access to university facilities forced the continuation of experimentation within domestic environments using household materials and limited working spaces. Despite these limitations, the period reinforced the study's emphasis on adaptability, improvisation, and the use of accessible natural materials. The methodological structure of this study reflects the characteristics of practice-based research commonly applied within postgraduate fine art programmes in higher education institutions. The integration of experimentation, observation, reflection, and studio production demonstrates how artistic practice functions simultaneously as research methodology and creative inquiry within fine art education.

6 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that natural materials possess significant conceptual and aesthetic potential within contemporary painting practices, particularly in relation to sustainability, material experimentation, and expressive abstraction. Several important findings emerged throughout the research process. The use of naturally sourced materials increased awareness toward environmental relationships and material appreciation. Through experimentation, the artist developed a deeper understanding of the transformative properties and limitations of organic substances.

The study further highlights how practice-based experimentation involving natural materials can strengthen contemporary fine art curricula by encouraging innovation, critical inquiry, sustainability awareness, and interdisciplinary thinking among students in higher education institutions. Finally, the study demonstrates that contemporary fine art education in higher education institutions can benefit significantly from integrating natural material experimentation into studio-based learning. Such approaches encourage students to engage critically with sustainability, environmental awareness, and alternative artistic processes while expanding the scope of contemporary painting practice, as illustrated

in Figure 6 below.



Figure 6 Final Exploration Process of Various Natural Materials in the Study

6.1 Natural Materials as Conceptual Agents

Natural substances were not merely replacements for industrial paints but functioned as conceptual agents embodying destruction, decay, instability, and transformation. Their unstable behaviour reinforced the conceptual framework surrounding environmental deterioration.

6.2 Spontaneity and Unpredictability

The study identified unpredictability as an essential component of artistic production. Drying reactions, gravity, moisture, sunlight, and accidental material movement generated spontaneous visual outcomes that strengthened the chaotic qualities of the landscapes.

6.3 Gesture and Physical Engagement

Bodily movement and physical engagement significantly influenced the expressive qualities of the artworks. Large working surfaces enabled aggressive gestures, emotional intensity, and spontaneous mark-making processes.

6.4 Environmental Awareness and Material Sensitivity

The findings also demonstrate the importance of integrating environmental awareness and sustainable material exploration into fine art education at higher education institutions. The use of natural substances encourages students and researchers to develop sensitivity toward ecological issues while simultaneously expanding their understanding of materiality in painting practice.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the construction of chaotic abstract landscapes through natural materials in investigating themes of environmental destruction and decay. Through practice-based experimentation and studio inquiry, the research demonstrated that natural substances possess strong conceptual and aesthetic capabilities within contemporary painting. Materials such as charcoal, coffee, turmeric, tea, food colouring, soil, and leaves generated spontaneous visual effects that contributed to expressive destructive landscapes. Their unstable reactions and transformative properties reinforced the conceptual framework surrounding ecological deterioration.

The research also highlighted the importance of bodily movement, gestural engagement, and environmental interaction within the painting process. Accidental effects, drying reactions, and natural transformations enabled the construction of layered surfaces that communicate emotional tension and instability.

Ultimately, the study contributes significantly to the field of fine art in higher education institutions by demonstrating how natural material experimentation can function simultaneously as artistic practice, conceptual inquiry, and pedagogical exploration within contemporary studio education. The research reinforces the significance of practice-based methodologies, sustainability awareness, and experimental studio processes in advancing contemporary fine art pedagogy and studio practice within tertiary education.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed equally to the development and production of this paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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