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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Silent Pollution and the Aesthetics of Ecological Absence: Artistic Responses to Subtle Environmental Disappearance**

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| ABSTRACT

The environmental crisis of the 21st century has brought to the fore the existential questions of human civilization. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental pollution—these three interconnected processes are rapidly transforming the Earth's ecosystems. This study goes beyond conventional visibility to explore an environmental reality that is silent, slow, and almost invisible. The concept of "Silent Pollution" is used as an important analytical framework in this context. It refers to a type of pollution that is not immediately visible, but has profound long-term effects. While this pollution may not create an immediate crisis, it gradually increases the fragility of life and ultimately leads to a widespread ecological absence. At the center of this study is a symbolic image—a small, fragile, almost invisible life representative of environmental change. The emphasis here is not on any specific species; rather, a generalized bio-image is used that serves as a symbol for the subtle levels of ecological balance. The research is based on a practice-based approach, where artistic practice and theoretical analysis work together. The medium of watercolor was chosen as the main tool for this research because its physical properties—fluidity, transparency, and uncontrollability—are deeply related to the concept of environmental change.

| KEYWORDS

Contemporary Art Practice, Watercolor Technique, Visual Representation, Environmental Art.

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**1. Introduction**

The current global environmental conditions have been established as a multidimensional and reality. Technological development, industrialization, and urbanization have also had an adverse impact on the natural environment of human life, including the improvement of the quality of life. We see the manifestation of this impact in various ways—air pollution, water pollution, deforestation, and climate change. However, this visible support is also an invisible and continuous change, which remains hidden from our view. This change is so subtle that it cannot be seen immediately, but its impact in the long term is very profound. In this study, "Silent Pollution and the Aesthetics of Ecological Absence: Artistic Responses to Subtle Environmental Disappearance," is a research of environmental pollution that changes the ecosystem, but does not immediately give any visible signal, which represented in a visual language. This study is a result of public awareness, and it becomes difficult to take preventive measures. In this context, art can play an important role. Art is not only a reflection of reality, but also a means to see reality in a new way. Environmental issues are an important issue, especially in contemporary practice. However, in most cases, these issues are presented in dramatic and symbolic ways, which sometimes obscure the subtle reality. The aim of this research is to bring that fundamental reality to light through an aesthetic visual language that is sharp, silent, and deeply controllable.

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### **1.1 Conceptual Framework**

The research is a process that gradually affects the environment, but is not immediately visible. It is a “low-visibility crisis” that deepens over time. This concept refers to the situation where an organism or element gradually disappears, and its absence creates a new reality. Here, absence itself takes the form of a presence. In this study, aesthetics is considered not only related to beauty but also as a complex process of feeling, perception, and thought.

## **2. Literature Review**

A key limitation of contemporary environmental discourse is the tendency to interpret environmental crises primarily in terms of visible and immediate catastrophes. But recent theoretical and scientific research suggests that a large part of environmental change occurs through slow, subtle, and almost invisible processes. In this context, the concept of “Silent Pollution” emerges as an important analytical framework that provides a way to understand silent and inconspicuous environmental degradation.

### **2.1 Ecological crisis and the theory of invisibility**

Timothy Morton’s concept of “hyperobjects” is particularly important in understanding environmental invisibility. Morton (2013) has shown that environmental realities such as climate change are so pervasive and long-lasting that they lie outside of human direct experience. Consequently, understanding such crises requires going beyond conventional notions of visibility. Similarly, Nixon (2011) uses the concept of “slow violence” to explain environmental destruction as a slow, invisible, and long-term violence that, while not immediately visible, is profound and widespread.<sup>1</sup>

### **2.2 Biodiversity loss and subtle environmental changes**

Scientific studies also provide evidence of these invisible changes. Hallmann et al. (2017) report a significant decline in the abundance of flying insects in Europe, which occurred gradually over a long period of time and was initially not very visible. Similarly, Sánchez-Bayo and Wyckhuys (2019) describe the global loss of biodiversity as a silent crisis.<sup>2</sup> These studies show that environmental degradation often occurs not in the form of visible catastrophes, but rather through slow and subtle changes. But an important aspect of these studies is that these changes are mostly invisible. That is, they occur so slowly over time that they are not detected by ordinary observation. This is important in the context of this study because it supports the concept of “ecological absence.” When an organism gradually disappears, its absence creates a new reality—one that is initially invisible but then has a profound impact.

### **2.3 Climate Changes through Visual language**

Research on light pollution and climate change also supports this idea. While such changes may not be immediately visible, their effects are profound and long-lasting. There is a long history of environmental work in contemporary art. Movements such as Land Art and Environmental Art engage directly with the environment. However, a common feature of these movements is that they often present environmental problems through large and visible interventions. In contrast, some recent art practices have attempted to present environmental crises through subtlety, silence, and absence.

Owens et al. (2020) have shown that artificial light disrupts the behavior of nocturnal animals, which in the long term affects the ecological balance.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary art has a long history of environmental work. Movements such as Land Art and Environmental Art engage directly with the environment. However, a common feature of these

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<sup>1</sup> Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press; Morton, T. (2013). *Hyper objects*. University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>2</sup> Hallmann, C. A., et al. (2017). “More than 75 percent decline...” PLOS ONE; Sánchez-Bayo, F., & Wyckhuys, K. (2019). *Biological Conservation*.

<sup>3</sup> Owens, A. C. S., Cochard, P., Durrant, J., Farnworth, B., Perkin, E. K., & Seymoure, B. (2020). Light pollution is a driver of insect declines. *Biological Conservation*, 247, 108259.

movements is that they often present environmental problems through large and visible interventions. In contrast, some recent art practices have attempted to present environmental crises through subtlety, silence, and absence.

Material aesthetics plays an important role in this context. Sullivan (2010) has shown that in practice-based research, the material itself can act as a medium for knowledge production.<sup>4</sup> In the case of watercolor, its fluidity, transparency, and uncontrollability create a visual language that is deeply connected to the concept of environmental change. Based on the above discussion, it can be said that an important aspect of the environmental crisis is its silence and invisibility. This research is an attempt to make those subtle changes visible through art, where the concept of "Silent Pollution" serves as a central theoretical framework.

#### **2.4 Related Artistic Practices**

Olafur Eliasson connects the environmental experience with the physical and sensory sensations of the viewer through his work. In his *Ice Watch* project, he creates a direct but slow experience of climate change by placing melting icebergs in the city. Although the work relies on visible elements, its effects are perceived gradually over time, which relates to the idea of silent environmental change.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (1982) questions the relationship between urbanization and the environment. By creating a wheat field next to the financial center of New York, she makes a silent but powerful environmental statement. Here, there is no direct image of pollution, but rather an unexpected presence that indicates an environmental crisis.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of environmental absence is more subtly presented by Maya Lin. In her *What is Missing?* The project deals with the loss of biodiversity, where a sense of emptiness is created through the memories and traces of missing species. Absence acts as the main aesthetic element, which is directly related to the concept of "Ecological Absence". Similarly, Andy Goldsworthy uses natural materials to create ephemeral artworks that fade over time. The lack of permanence and the continuity of change in his works serve as symbols of environmental fragility. This ephemerality is linked to the concept of "Silent Pollution", where change occurs slowly, and traces are erased.

Analyzing the work of these artists shows that it is not necessary to rely solely on visible catastrophes to represent the environmental crisis. Rather, it is possible to create a deeper aesthetic experience through subtlety, time, absence, and material change.

### **3. Methodology**

This study follows a qualitative and practice-based approach to analyze the concept of "Silent Pollution" and its aesthetic representation. Combining theoretical inquiry and studio-based art practice, artwork creation is considered as a means of knowledge production. The conceptual framework of the study is initially determined through a literature review on environmental theory, material-based research, and contemporary art practice.

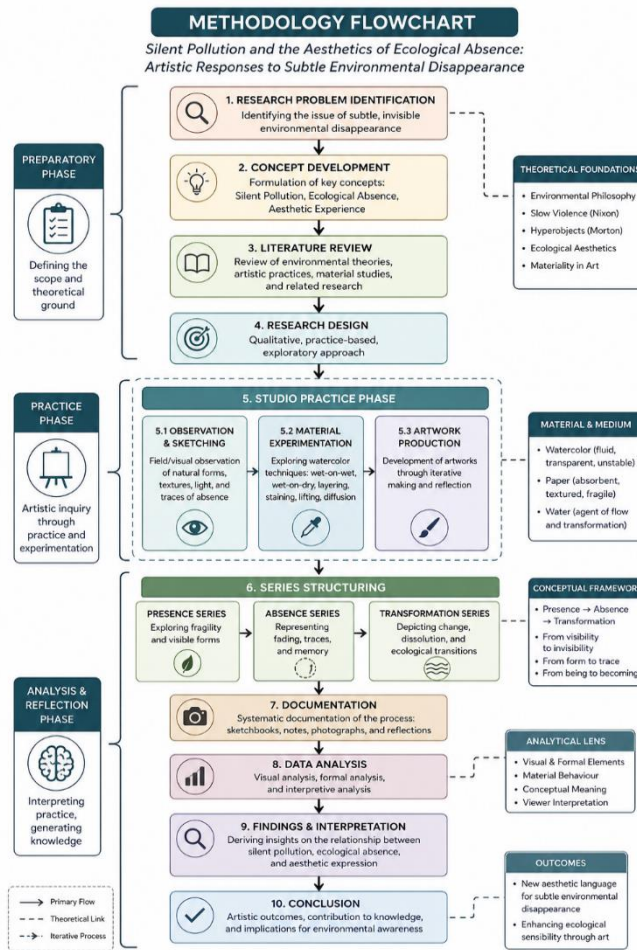
Watercolor is used as the main medium at the studio level, as its fluidity, transparency, and uncontrollable properties are consistent with the concept of environmental change. The research process begins with observational sketching of natural forms and fragile organic structures, which later evolves into material experimentation through wet-on-wet, layering, and staining techniques. These methods are helpful in creating visual expressions of pollution, dissolution, and transformation.

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<sup>4</sup> Sullivan, G. (2010). *Art practice as research: Inquiry in visual arts*. Sage Publications.

<sup>5</sup> Eliasson, O. (2014). *Ice Watch Project Documentation*.

<sup>6</sup> Denes, A. (1982). *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*. Public Art Fund, New York.



**Figure 1: Methodology Flowchart**

The artworks created based on this experiment are organized into three stages—Presence, Absence, and Transformation—that indicate a gradual transition from visibility to absence. The entire process is reflectively analyzed through sketchbooks and documentation. This research shows that a practice-based approach is an effective way to understand subtle environmental realities.

The research is structured in three stages:

- Theoretical analysis.
- Studio-based experiments.
- Reflective analysis.

#### 4. Discussion and Findings

##### 4.1 Chronological background and evolution

Environmental pollution has become an increasingly important theme in art history, reflecting societal change, industrialization, and the complexity of human-nature relationships. Over time, artists have represented the visible and invisible effects of pollution in various ways—sometimes as a reflection of reality, sometimes as a means of protest and awareness. With the onset of industrialization, especially during the Industrial Revolution, environmental changes began to attract the attention of artists. Artists of this period depicted the smoky skies of cities, polluted air, and changing landscapes. For example, Claude Monet used light to depict the effects of industrialization in his London series. Although pollution was not directly criticized in his works, it was seen as a changing state of the environment.

Later, in the early 20th century, Futurism and other modern art movements celebrated industrialization, but also depicted the pollution and chaos associated with it. Umberto Boccioni's works combined the complexity of mobility, technology, and polluted urban life. Here, pollution was a side effect that became part of modernity. From the 1960s, environmental art gained a new dimension, known as Environmental Art or Land Art. In this movement, artists worked directly with nature to address environmental issues. Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty (1970) is an important example of nature, time, and environmental change, where the artwork itself became part of the environment and changed over time.

#### **4.2 Influence of Pollution on Art Movements**

Since the 1960s, environmental art has taken on a new dimension, known as Environmental Art or Land Art. In this genre, artists work directly with nature to address environmental issues. Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty (1970) is an important example of nature, time, and environmental change, where the artwork itself becomes part of the environment and changes over time.

Pollution is being used as a powerful conceptual element in contemporary art. Many artists are directly addressing environmental crises through their work and raising awareness among viewers. Agnes Denes' Wheatfield – A Confrontation project challenges the relationship between urbanization and environmental degradation, where a wasteland is transformed into a wheat field.

In addition, contemporary artists are using new media and materials to more sharply present the effects of pollution. For example, Chris Jordan highlights the horrors of plastic pollution through his work, where plastic accumulated inside the body of a dead bird becomes a symbol of our consumerist society. This continuity suggests that art is not simply a reflection of environmental realities, but rather takes an active social and moral stance. Through their work, artists pose questions to viewers—is the progress of human civilization being achieved at the expense of nature?



**Figure 2:** Claude Monet, *Houses of Parliament in the Fog*, 1903



**Figure 3:** Umberto Boccioni, *The City Rises*, 1910

#### **4.3 The Industrial Revolution through the Decades: Pollution and Art Movements**

In the contemporary context, pollution-related art practice is focusing not only on visible disasters but also on subtle, invisible, and slow environmental changes. From this perspective, the concept of "Silent Pollution" creates a new aesthetic and theoretical field, where pollution is experienced through its traces, effects, and absences rather than being directly visible. There is no drama or exaggeration in these research works. Rather, there is a silence that forces the viewer to gradually connect with the work. This silence acts as an active aesthetic element. It slows the viewer's attention and leads them to a deeper experience. This process is consistent with Timothy Morton's theoretical idea, where environmental reality is gradually perceived rather than directly perceived. An important feature of these works is the marks and layers that form on the surface. These marks are not just visual elements, but also carry a memory. Each layer represents a period of time, which gradually accumulates to create a complex surface. This process is comparable to ecological history, where different layers of change accumulate over time and create a complex reality.

In this study, the viewer is an active participant. Because the works do not directly convey a message, rather, they create an open interpretation. The viewer is required to construct meaning from the work through their own experiences and perceptions. This process creates a participatory aesthetic experience that is profound and lasting.



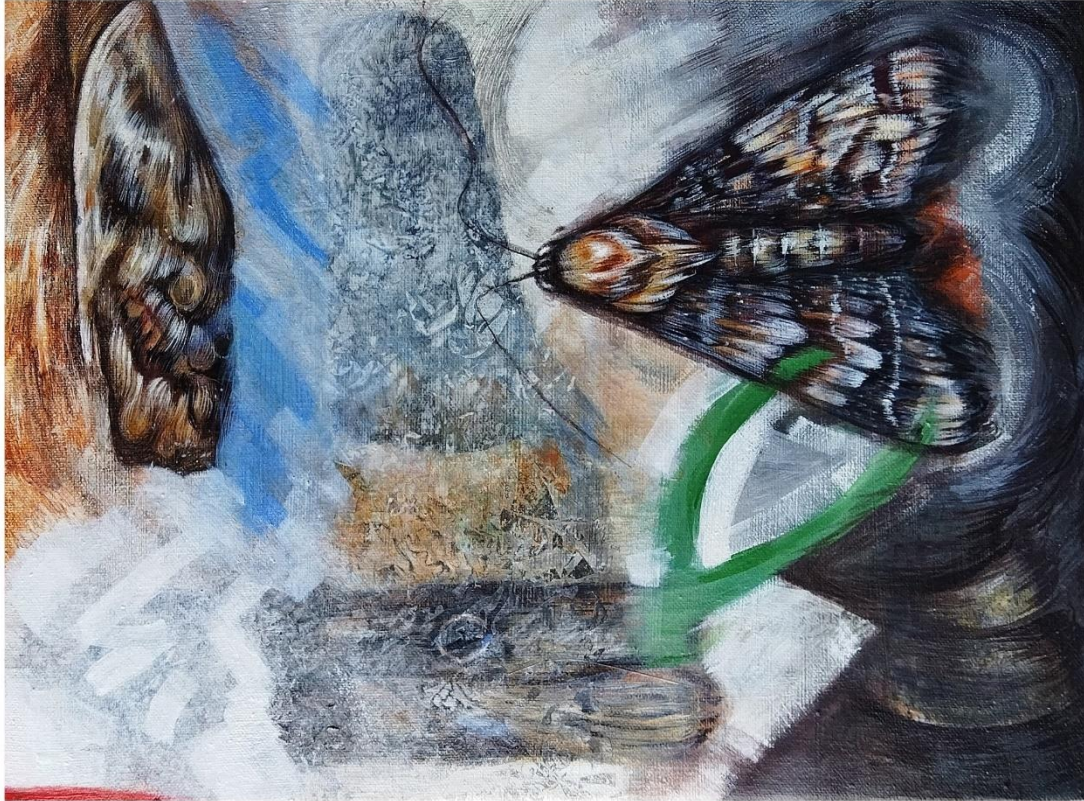
**Figure 4:** Charles Sheeler, *Classic Landscape*, Oil On Canvas, 1931

#### **4.4 Contemporary Artistic Responses to Pollution**

This artwork presents the concept of "Silent Pollution" through a subtle aesthetic language, where the focus is on the slow, invisible, and subconscious effects of pollution rather than its visible effects. Here, the partial dissolution, dissolution, and merging of the insect-like form with the environment serves as an important metaphor, indicating the process of environmental absence. The fluidity, transparency, and uncontrolled spread of the watercolors reinforce this idea, as the behavior of the color itself becomes a symbol of the spread and uncontrolled nature of pollution.

The surface of this work acts as an active aesthetic field, where stains, layers, and traces of decay accumulate over time, creating an environmental history. As a result, the distinction between form and background dissolves, and a sense of a unified polluted environment is created. This process indicates a slow transition from presence to absence, where the living entity gradually loses its individuality and becomes part of the environment.

There is no drama or image of immediate catastrophe; Rather, an experience of silent, slow, and almost invisible change is created, which takes the viewer into a deep, reflective state. From this perspective, the work presents the environmental crisis as a “slow violence,” where destruction is not visible, but inevitable.



**Figure 5:** Chitram Sen Anik, *Silent Pollution*, Acrylic On Canvas, 2025

Compositionally, the work breaks down the conventional division of subject and background. The insect-like form is not placed on the surface, but rather forms and dissolves within the surface. As a result, the viewer does not experience a distinct entity, but rather a changing state. This process reflects an important aspect of the ecological crisis, where the boundary between organism and environment gradually dissolves, and eventually the organism itself becomes part of the polluted environment.



**Figure 6:** Chitram Sen Anik, *Silent Pollution-3*, Watercolor, 2026

#### **4.5 Use of the medium**

The use of the medium of watercolor is significant here. Its inherent properties—fluidity, transparency, and uncontrolled spreading—conceptually reflect the spread of environmental pollution. The layers of color are sometimes thin and transparent, sometimes thick and solid, indicating different densities and levels of pollution. In particular, the marks that have been created, such as stains, serve as symbols of the lasting effects of pollution. Here, color is not just color; it is a process that is slowly changing the surface.

**Figure 7:** Close up representation of air pollution (*Silent Pollution-3*)



**Figure 8:** Air Pollution

#### **4.6 The boundary between subject and environment**

The partial disappearance of the form indicates a slow transition from “presence” to “absence.” In some parts of the work, the form is clear, while in other parts it is blurred or completely merged with the background. This

incompleteness and fragmentation serve as an important aesthetic technique, as it actively involves the viewer in the process of interpretation. The complete absence of form creates a powerful presence here, which is deeply related to the concept of "ecological absence."



**Figure 9:** Environment Pollution

Another important aspect of this work is its silence. There are no dramatic scenes, intense colors, or flashy elements. Instead, a restrained, gentle, and slow visual language is used, forcing the viewer to gradually engage with the work. Overall, this artwork presents environmental pollution through its effects, impressions, and residual traces rather than a direct depiction. Here, the pollution is not visible, but its presence is felt. This approach gives a powerful aesthetic to the concept of "Silent Pollution," where absence, disappearance, and surface change combine to create a profound environmental narrative. As a result, the work can be considered an important contribution to contemporary environmental art practice, where the emphasis is on feeling and perception rather than visibility.



**Figure 10:** Close up representation of water pollution (*Silent Pollution-3*)



**Figure 11:** Water Pollution

In this study, the viewer is an active participant. Because the works do not directly convey a message; rather, they create an open interpretation. The viewer is required to construct meaning from the work through their own experiences and perceptions. This process creates a participatory aesthetic experience that is profound and lasting.

## Findings

- The flow, transparency, and uncontrollability of watercolor conceptually represent the process of environmental pollution.
- The gradual dissolution of form serves as a powerful visual metaphor for the loss of biodiversity.
- The boundaries between subject and environment are broken, revealing the loss of ecological identity.
- The surface acts as an active ecological narrative, where layers and stains bear the marks of time.
- Absence creates a more powerful aesthetic experience than direct representation.
- Through slow and silent changes, “slow violence” can be visually expressed.
- Through the process of layering and staining, time is incorporated into the artwork.
- The open visual language turns the viewer into an active interpreter.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has shown that it is not enough to rely solely on visible disasters to understand the environmental crisis. Rather, silent and invisible changes need to be given equal importance. Through the concept of “Silent Pollution”, this study presents an alternative aesthetic perspective, where environmental reality is seen as a slow, subtle, and internal process. It is possible to make these ideas visible through the medium of watercolor, which proves that art can be a powerful medium, not just for representation, but as a means of perception and thought. This study can serve as a foundation for a broader eco-art practice in the future, where new types of aesthetic languages are created, focusing on silence, absence, and fragility.

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