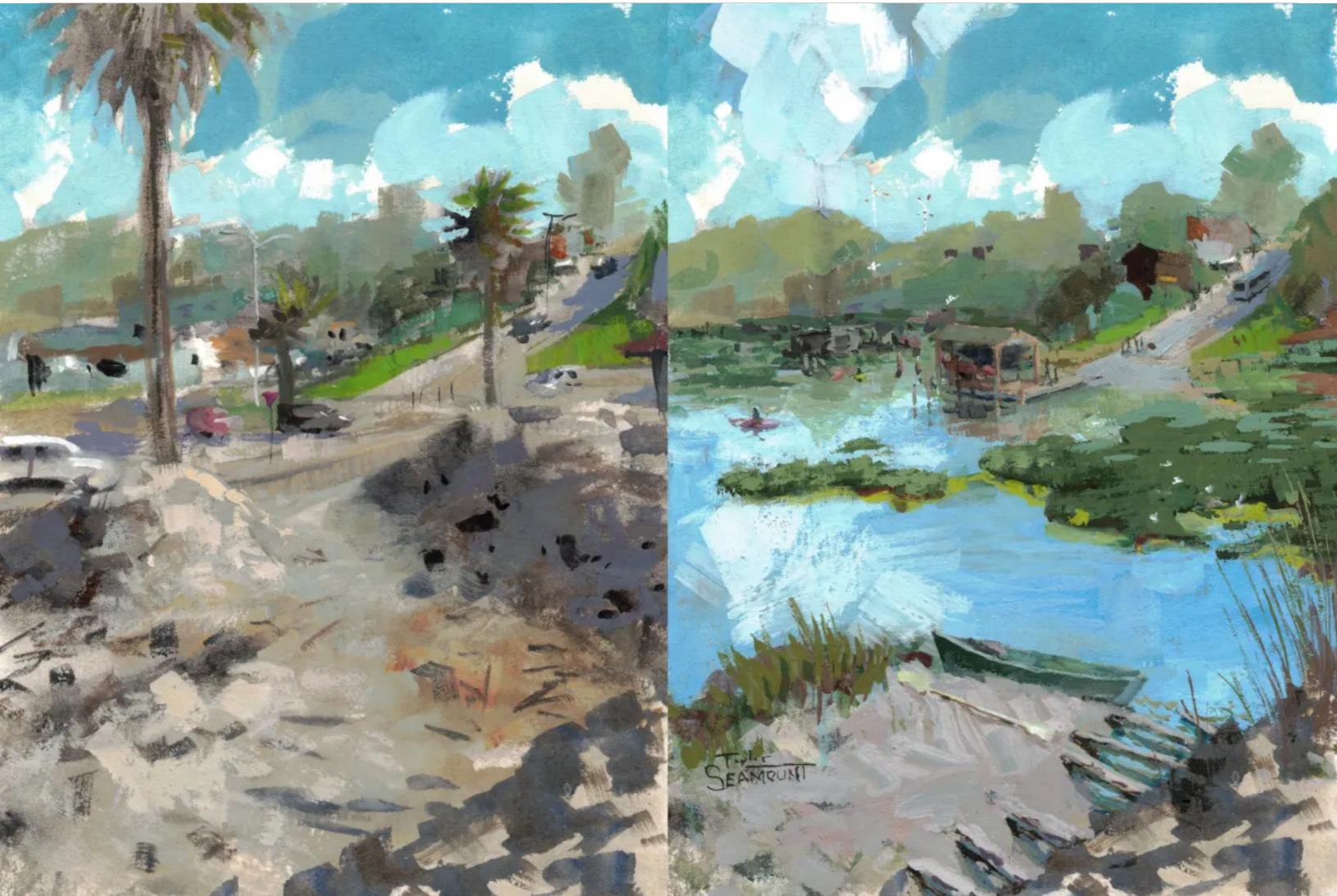


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"Rio Del Mar Slough": On the left is a painting from the top of one of the piles of sand scraped out of the Rio Del Mar neighborhood after the 2023 winter storms. The painting on the right depicts a future where the community has stewarded Rio Del Mar's return to wetland in response to climate change. Credit: Taylor Seamount

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Through paintings, local artist Taylor Seamount reimagines Santa Cruz as an eco-utopia



BY ALIX SOLIMAN

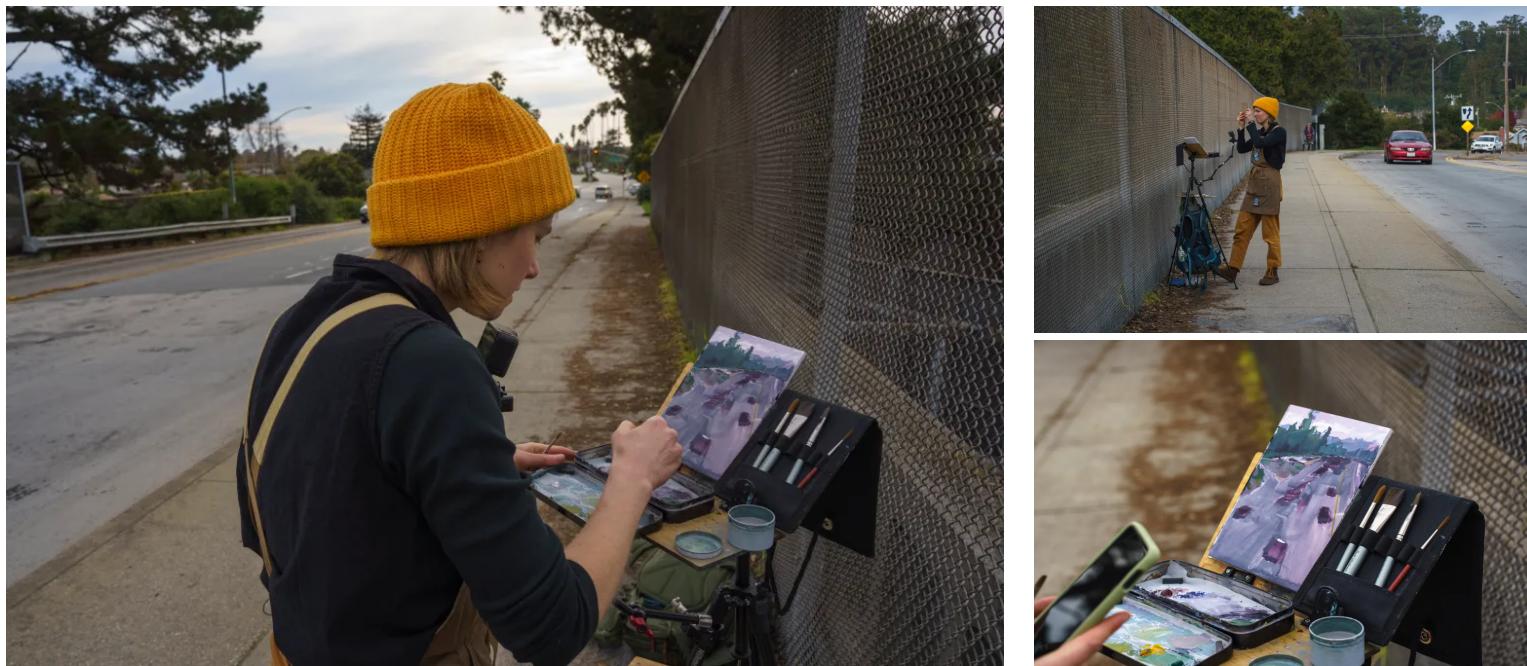
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 **Quick Take**

To combat the hopelessness they feel, Taylor Seamount has turned to an environmental art movement called solar punk – a utopian artistic and literary genre that pictures a world where humanity addresses climate change, environmental destruction and social inequality.

When most people walk through expansive parking lots or fields of invasive grass, they see familiar American landscapes. Not Santa Cruz painter Taylor Seamount. They see a dystopian reality spreading out before them, filling them with “day-ruining existential dread.” Observing a world so modified by human activity — to the detriment of both people and nature — Seamount can’t help but feel depressed at sights such as these.

To combat the hopelessness they feel, Seamount has turned to an environmental art movement called solar punk. Solar punk is a utopian artistic and literary genre that pictures a world where humanity addresses climate change, environmental destruction and social inequality. In their new series, Seamount paints a Santa Cruz scene true to reality —“en plein air” — then repaints it as an eco-utopia.



Under their brush, the empty parking lot at Seacliff State Beach becomes a community garden. The sandpit scooped out of Rio Del Mar after the winter storms is restored to a thriving coastal wetland. Rush-hour traffic on Highway 1 vanishes, transformed into a high-speed rail line.

This form of “speculative fiction” sees humans as stewards of the land, with infrastructure and governance sliding into harmony with nature. Seamount wants their art to inspire people to imagine their own ideal world.

"I think it's really productive for people to practice visioning," they said. Surrounded by all of the bad news about climate change and other issues society faces, Seamount says it's easy for people to become apathetic. Dreaming of a better future — instead of just accepting how things are now — can help people break free from apathy and take action in their community, they suggest.



"Traffic Rebellion": On the left is a painting of evening traffic as viewed from the Morrissey Boulevard overpass above Highway 1 in Santa Cruz. The scene is repainted with high-speed rail at the center divider beside a transfer station to the prolific local bus line. A line of native trees divides the road from the rail. Through trial and error the community has settled on a permit system allowing only occupational trucks to use the roads with the buses. Vehicles are adorned with murals by local artists. Credit: Taylor Seamount



"Seacliff Community Garden": The upper parking lot at Seacliff State Beach is hardly utilized and would be unnecessary in a system optimized for public transit. Here it is shown replaced by a community permaculture garden. Credit: Taylor Seamount

Seamount gathers inspiration from science fiction novels like "The Fifth Sacred Thing" by Starhawk and "The Dispossessed" by Ursula K. Le Guin, as well as from their intensely vivid dreams. Each night when they go to sleep, they explore alternate realities — a city strung up in tree canopies, an underground utopia protected from catastrophe above, and even their own neighborhood in Aptos transformed into a cooperative living village.

Now 33, Seamount has been painting since they can remember. They describe their Santa Cruz upbringing as idyllic, having spent their days wandering amongst the redwoods. Seamount fondly recalls "playing fairies" on the UC Santa Cruz campus with their best friend, whose parents lived in the faculty neighborhood.



"Santa Teresa Stewards": On the left, community scientists monitor tree growth and weed around native shrubs at the Pueblo Day Use Area in Santa Teresa County Park. A burn scar from a recent controlled burn is also featured. On the right, the scene is repainted imagining the goals of the stewardship coming to fruition. Credit: Taylor Seamount



"Protect Juristac": Juristac is the most sacred land for the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and a crucial wildlife habitat. It's currently threatened by mining interests. Credit: Taylor Seamount

"That neighborhood felt like a kind of utopia to me — everyone knew each other and the kids could just roam," they said. "I feel like my spiritual and artistic home is the UCSC campus."

In adulthood, Seamount developed postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS), a condition affecting their heart rate that causes them to experience chronic fatigue. They used to participate in climate protests in their 20s, but they've had to shift their avenue for activism to be more personally sustainable.

Seamount says they forged a new path forward by following climate activist Ayana Elizabeth Johnson's three pillars to action: what the world needs, what skills you have to offer and what your passion is. "For me, that trifecta is my solar punk art," they said. "I can only be consistent about this one thing."

They tend to use gouache, a more opaque type of watercolor, to bring their utopian landscapes to life. Seamount films the process using a GoPro on time-lapse, then posts the videos voiced-over with

accompanying essays on [TikTok](#) and [YouTube](#).

Watch the video below, where Seamount describes their connection to solar punk art and why it's important to them. They share their dream for a transportation system in which "traffic just wouldn't happen." And Seamount sets up an easel on the Morrissey Boulevard overpass over Highway 1 to bring that vision to bear.



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"VOCal Weekend 2": V-O-Cal volunteers remove invasive French broom in Memorial County Park. Credit: Taylor Seamount