

ArtSeen

## ecofeminism(s)

By [Alex A. Jones](#)



Betsy Damon, *The Memory of Clean Water*, 1985. © Betsy Damon. Courtesy the artist.

You could say it is a terrible time to open a gallery show. New York City languishes in an ongoing lockdown to contain the coronavirus pandemic, while a nationwide civil rights movement calls for our attention. But for one of the few exhibitions recently opened in the city, the timing feels powerful. It is a show about ecological urgency in the time of a global crisis. It speaks to activism as an artistic strategy, and points to the entanglement of struggles for social and environmental justice.

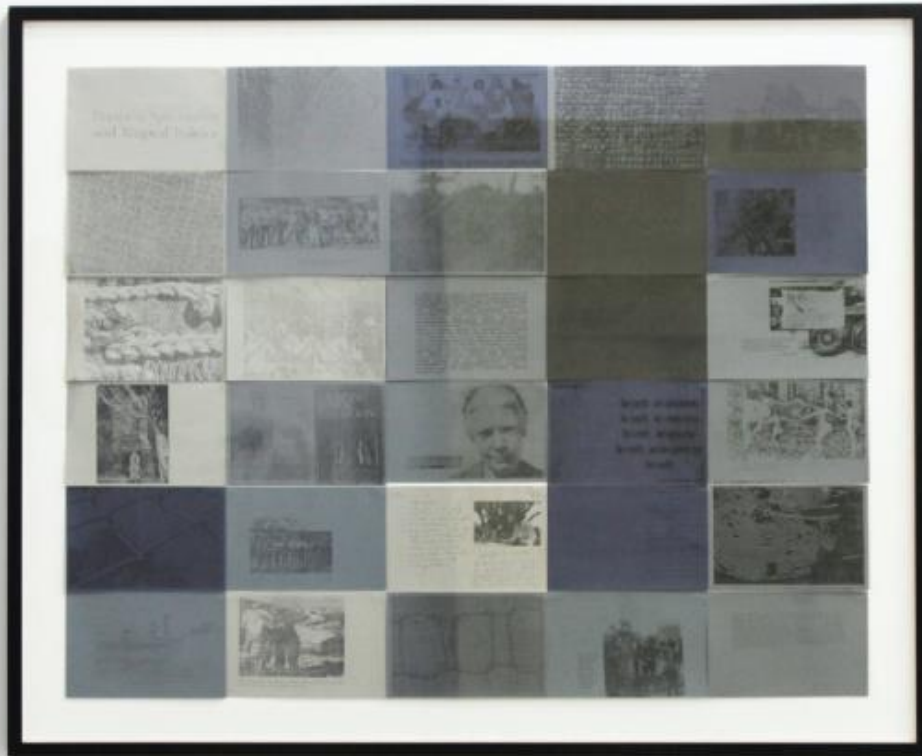
ON VIEW

Thomas Erben  
New York

*ecofeminism(s)* is a group show with an ambitious curatorial stance. It looks at the mutual development of feminist and ecological art in the 1970s and '80s, while highlighting recent ecological art by women. Curator Monika Fabijanska casts ecofeminism not as a discreet movement but as an expansive concept, one that can historicize an underrecognized current in women's art and help us reimagine the role of the artist in times of collective struggle.

The most striking physical presence in the show is Betsy Damon's *The Memory of Clean Water* (1985), a paper-pulp cast of a dry riverbed in Utah. It is a death mask of Castle Creek, which dried up after the construction of an upstream dam. Splotches of red and blue mineral pigments decorate the surface of the paper, which is otherwise colored by the dust of the riverbed and embedded with bits of grass and stone. It overflows the wall onto the floor and the ceiling, but this portion of the cast is only a fraction of the full, 250-foot-long work. Damon's art is not well known today, in part because the process of making *The Memory of Clean Water* inspired her to dedicate her subsequent work to water remediation. She started a non-profit, Keepers of the Waters, to improve global water systems and educate people about water quality. The organization's largest project to date is the Living Water Garden in the city of Chengdu, China, an ecological park that diverts polluted water from the Fu and Nan rivers into a wetland filtration system, from which it emerges clean enough to drink. The system doesn't process enough water to change pollution levels in the massive river system, but it's enough to make a point about what's possible.

At a moment when the need for social change compels some artists to engage in protest and organizing, Damon's career raises interesting questions. What is the tipping point between studio practice and direct action? How can art function to bring about tangible change in the world? At what point do we abandon the gallery and take to the street? On the other hand, *ecofeminism(s)* invites us to consider how activism bleeds meaningfully back into the gallery. In the case of *Feminist Spirituality and Magical Politics Scrapbook* (2003), Andrea Bowers becomes an artist-historian for the American anti-nuclear movement. The piece is a collage of ephemera from demonstrations including the 1980 Women's Pentagon Action against nuclear arms, and the 1981 Mothers for Peace protest against the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant. The work alludes to a history of activism and coalition-building between feminists and indigenous peoples, a story that is surely vital to the younger generation of Americans now practicing the art of protest and solidarity.



Andrea Bowers, *Feminist Spirituality and Magical Politics Scrapbook*, 2003. Photocopy on paper, 33 1/4 x 42 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps gallery.

Environmental activism is often led by people who are oppressed by the entangled politics of gender, race, and class. The logic of domination that modern man applies to land and nonhuman life has simply been more recognizable to those who have been subjected to the same logic. As a critical strategy, ecofeminism has interrogated the connection between the devaluation of women and the devaluation of “nature,” which is itself so often gendered female. In *ecofeminism(s)*, an image by Barbara Kruger shows a woman with leaves covering her eyes, overlaid with a characteristic block-letter slogan that warns of awakening and resistance: *Untitled (We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture)*(1983).

The exhibition highlights numerous artistic strategies that intertwine such feminist critique with ecological consciousness. Hanae Utamura's *Secret Performance Series* (2010-13) poke fun at the tradition of Land Art in a reel of short videos that show the artist making futile attempts to alter the landscape. Utamura pushes a broom across the surface of a Saharan dune, making marks that will be obliterated by the wind within

hours; she tries to dump blood-red pigment down the face of a seaside cliff, but the ocean breeze instantly blows the powder away in a comedic puff of color. Across the gallery, photographs of early performances by Agnes Denes depart from the notion of Earthworks as grand, formalist interventions in the landscape. In photos from *Rice/Tree/Burial: Burial of the Time Capsule* (1977-79/2020), Denes plants a field of rice and buries poetry in the ground.



Hanae Utamura, *Wiping the Sahara Desert*, 2010. HD video, 2:04 min. © Hanae Utamura. Courtesy the artist.

Sculptural practices featured in the show are also embedded in ecological consciousness. Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña's "*precarios*" are easy to miss. These unobtrusive sculptures are made from found natural materials and trash, a mode in which Vicuña has been working for decades. They are talismanic, timeless visual metaphors of weaving, binding, and re-attaching meaning. On the opposite end of the technological spectrum, there is a proposal by Lynn Hershman Leeson for a portable device that purifies water and breaks down plastics using electricity and microorganisms, called *Twisted Gravity* (2020), which the artist is currently developing in collaboration with a Harvard lab. When the filter has done its work, an LED panel illuminates the shape of the "Water Woman," an image that has recurred in Leeson's work as a symbol for transformation, healing, and survival.

The curatorial scope of this show is tentacular, but water and healing are unifying themes. Water is at the center of works by Damon, Leeson, Rahmani, Vicuña, and also

Mary Mattingly's *Swale* (2015–present), a floating food garden in New York City's waterways. Like a riff on Robert Smithson's *Floating Island* (1970–2005) that addresses the vulnerability of urban food supplies, *Swale* is a functional experiment in food production and an assertion of water as commons. It gestures productively toward a future in which water will only become more contested: some places will drown in it, while others dry up, and everywhere contamination will deplete water's capacity to support life. As a culture processing this reality, we falter in a state of shock or outright denial, but in fact, the significance of water in our collective future has been predicted for a very long time. According to many ancient systems of marking time, we are currently entering a new astrological age. In some cultures, this era is symbolized by a vessel for transporting water. In others, the vessel is carried by a woman. This is Aquarius, the water bearer.



Carla Maldonado, *Dystopia of a Jungle City, and the Human of Nature*, 2019. Digital video with sound, 31 min. © Carla Maldonado. Courtesy the artist.

*ecofeminism(s)* suggests that the knowledge we require to adapt is being carried, recovered, and newly imagined. Learning and amplifying traditional knowledge is yet another strategy of ecofeminist art, which is best accomplished here in one of the most recent works on view, Carla Maldonado's *Dystopia of a Jungle City, and the Human of Nature* (2019). This documentary film depicts the threat to Brazil's indigenous people under the regime of Jair Bolsonaro, who is committed to developing the Amazon rainforest and revoking laws protecting their lands. "The Amazon Forest is my economic

strategy,” Bolsonaro declares chillingly at the start of the film. A radically different strategy of relation with the Amazon is presented in footage from Maldonado’s time with the Cípia people, who carry on traditional ways of life a stone’s throw from the city of Manaus, where urbanization and fires encroach on the forest. We see the Cípia community making plant medicines, building homes, and continuing to live in mutual contingency with the land under increasing external threat. In many ways, it would be easier to concede to pressures to abandon their way of life. The film concludes with footage of native women protesting in Rio de Janeiro, one of whom puts into words the point of carrying on: “We, the indigenous women, have mobilized in Brazil’s capital city, to say that we won’t stand for genocide politics against us. They say they must integrate us into contemporary society, but what kind of society is that?...The destruction of our environment is our own destruction.”

Electrified by anger and resilience, their message resonates with waves of protest currently unfolding across the United States. This is part of the exercise of ecological thought, which teaches us to recognize interlocking power structures and systemic forms of oppression. It is the simple center from which ecological consciousness radiates: all things are connected.

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