



STIR > SEE > FEATURES

Revisioning inclusive tomorrows through the art of 'ecofeminism(s)'

Monika Fabijanska's exhibition at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York examines the evolution of ecofeminist art to help us imagine alternate models for the future.

by Jones John | Published on : Sep 07, 2020

"Climate change is real," announces a blinking neon sign that is mounted on a wall of Thomas Erben Gallery in [New York](#). The artwork, which was made by the [Los Angeles](#)-based new media artist Andrea Bowers, seems to overstate the obvious in an age where [global warming](#) and climate justice are increasingly becoming part of everyday parlance. Yet, the need to assert this fact is a gentle reminder that even now there are many who live in denial or complacency in adapting to this global crisis. Amongst the many epiphanies the [COVID-19](#) pandemic has brought about is the reluctant realisation that the issues that confront contemporary civilisation are more intertwined than humanity might be willing to accept. Disruptions in wild spaces reverberate in the urban metropolises and, albeit in varying proportions, all forms of life face the brunt of flippant ideas of progress that refuse to reflect

holistically on its consequences. Extraction, irrigation, urbanisation, industrialisation and many other processes that characterise urban notions of development have made a privileged section of mankind into a radical geological force, a capacity whose responsibilities are yet to be grappled with.



Rice/Tree/Burial: Preparations for the Rice Field with Irrigation System by Agnes Denes

Image: Courtesy of Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

Since the 1970s, ecofeminism has been an important base for divergent models that grapple with the inconsistencies in humanity's relationship with the natural world, and alongside the activism, epitomised by protests such as the Chipko movement in [India](#) and the Green Belt Movement in [Kenya](#), that activated this mode of thinking and brought to it significant public attention, art played an important part in attempting to communicate the concerns of its proponents. The space that ecofeminist artists occupied in the art scene is particularly interesting with its dual character in that it was informed by the general marginalisations of women, nature and indigenous people, but simultaneously it was emerging from the marginalisation and exclusion of women specifically within the commercial artworld, and as such many of these early pioneers spent their careers without adequate representation in art history.

Commercial limitation was among the reasons many of these artists employed non-traditional, natural and often ephemeral media which put them improperly alongside philosophically disparate trends towards [contemporary art](#) such as conceptual art or land art. As the art historian Monika Fabijanska explains, "they were fighting for such forums of art that would not leave a footprint or would not add to storage". Alongside this, sometimes conscious, lack of documentation, the popularity of eco-feminism has diminished through the 21st century and it was this awareness that necessitated for Fabijanska an inspection into practices since the last half century that might be grouped within this expansive bracket.



Mark, Polar Bear by Sonya Kelliher-Combs

Image: Courtesy of Sonya Kelliher-Combs and Minus Space

Thomas Erben's serendipitous correspondence with Fabijanska – serendipitous as the gallerist was not aware of Fabijanska's research into the subject – asking her to curate an exhibition around ecofeminism in his gallery is reflective of how environmental consciousness is once again demanding peoples' attention. With the

number of environmental disasters or anomalies growing rapidly by the year and popular movements such as 'Fridays for Future' grabbing the attention of the masses, the timing for Fabijanska's exhibition *ecofeminism(s)*, consciously plural so as to allow multiple approaches to inhabit its structure, is rather opportune as it allows us to look back at a set of rather poignant and holistic perspectives that could have otherwise easily slipped through the gaps, as a means to revising our demands for tomorrow.



All the Way to Hell by Eliza Evans

Image: Courtesy of Eliza Evans

A recurring motif in the exhibition is mysticism and this emerges from ecofeminist models from across the globe. While this might seem as an anathema to rationalism thought, Fabijanska is quick to address its significance: "Ecofeminism is founded in spiritual feminism and in the process of researching for this exhibition I realised that we, over the past years, censored spiritualism in art. I myself found it uninteresting and, you know, kind of like a side thing maybe, and then I realised that I am absolutely wrong, that actually it is centre to this whole issue. So, feminist spiritualism proposed to end the dualism introduced by western patriarchal

religions, between nature and culture, body and mind, male and female elements, and it also heavily focused on ritual: the rituals of cleansing, cleaning, taking care, supporting and often those rituals took the form of [performance art](#) but they also took into consideration ideas such as the cycle of life and the nature of it, unlike the idea of progress or achieving any ideal and final work of art”.



*A still from [Dystopia of a Jungle City, and the Human of Nature](#) by Carla Maldonado
Image: Courtesy of Carla Maldonado*

Relationships between urban centres of the global north and the periphery are also forced into reconsideration with works such as Ana Mendieta's *Bacayu* in incised representations of Taino goddesses remarkably taking the form of European Venuses. It is a testament to her Euro-American art education, which was a result of her being forcibly relocated to the [United States of America](#) during Operation Peter Pan during which some 14,000 Cuban children were separated from their parents as part of a 'rescue' from the nascent communist regime. Other works, such as those of Sonya Kelliher-Combs, who brings to the viewer's notice the abusive hegemonies that have been established by different colonialisations in

Alaska, and Carla Maldonado, whose film *Dystopia of a Jungle City, and the Human of Nature* is a comparative critique of the infringements by the Jair Bolsonaro government into the wild spaces of [Brazil](#), juxtaposes fragments of indigenous life with abject contemporary realities to bring light to the violence of modernisations on their native lands.



Wiping the Sahara Desert(2010) from *Secret Performance* series by Hanae Utamura

Image: Courtesy of Hanae Utamura

Alongside being a forum to address various social and environmental concerns, the exhibition is also meant to help in a certain kind of community building, bringing the legacies of veteran ecofeminist artists to the notice of a new generation of practitioners. "I am a feminist art historian and my thinking is that we must always help continue this legacy and that women must not always reinvent the wheel every generation," says Fabijanska. Parallely, *ecofeminism(s)*' multidisciplinary approach makes it an ideal site for scholars of feminism, ecology and other similar or subtly interrelated subjects to find common ground.

'Ecofeminism(s)' will be on display from September 8-26, 2020, at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York.



Left to right: Bilge Friedlaender's daughter Mira Friedlaender, Hanae Utamura, Carla Maldonado, Monika Fabijanska and Thomas Erben standing in Bilge Friedlaender's installation *Cedar Forest*, 1989. Artworks by Mary Mattingly, Cecilia Vicuña and Ana Mendieta on the walls

Image: Courtesy of Monika Fabijanska