

July 8, 2020

Coming Full Circle

ecofeminism(s) at Thomas Erben



Installation view of *ecofeminism(s)* at Thomas Erben Gallery, with Jessica Segall's *Fugue in B Flat* in the foreground.
Photo by the author.

After the seismic shifts in our culture in the first half of 2020, will the art world continue as if nothing has happened, or will it adjust to address the many questions and objections to the status quo that have been raised? If one is going to choose the latter path, It's fitting to focus on a different kind of non market-driven and self-aware kind of art. Ecofeminist art practices focus directly on situations affecting life and the body and the conditions in which the body lives, especially regarding the exploitation of women and traditionally oppressed groups. This extraordinary gateway exhibition, precisely yet expansively curated by Monika Fabijanska, is a survey, a retrospective, and an education all in one. Because of the space constraints of [Thomas Erben](#) as a modest-sized commercial gallery, the show — which could fill a museum — is by necessity more of a primer meant to lure one deeper into the movement. The works and

projects presented in *ecofeminism(s)* exist for themselves, the artists that made them, and the viewers, which is liberating and elevating. These objects are produced as part of analysis and protest, as well as methods of healing and solutions to the problems facing the environment. For the most part these artists sidestep the market. In some cases they have built into their production a proscribed destruction at the end of the art work's life-cycle: Cecilia Vicuña's *precarios* (2014) are constructions of bits of found thread, plastic, wire, and driftwood that are intended eventually to be returned to the ocean from whence they emerged.



Hanae Utamura, *Wiping the Sahara Desert*, 2010, from *Secret Performance Series*, 2010-2013, HD Video, 2:04 min, Sahara Desert, Tunisia, edition of 3 + 1AP + 1EP. ©2010 Hanae Utamura. Image courtesy of the artist.

The exhibition covers a trajectory of almost fifty years; the earliest work is the description and photographic documentation of Aviva Rahmani's *Physical Education*, (1973) and the show proceeds up to 2020, with an odd lack of any work from the 1990's (perhaps indicating a marked fall-off in activist work at that time?). Except for Ana Mendieta's *Bacayu (Esculturas Rupestres) [Light of Day (Rupestrian Sculptures)]* (1981/2019), which is the representation of a female torso, there is a clear rejection of realistic or representative art and traditional media. Instead, the artists work in more immediate tactile, visceral, and performative experiences: the results are thus primarily photographic, or are documentations of an event, as in Hélène Aylon's *Earth Ambulance* (1982) and Eliza Evan's *All the Way to Hell* (2020). We do watch, on video, Hanae Utemura perform her cleansing rituals in *Secret Performance Series* (a selection, 2010-2013). Barbara Kruger and Andrea Bowers attest to women's role as protector's of the earth (in stark contrast to men's exploitation of the earth and women) via advertising, in

Untitled (We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture) (1983), a catalog cover for Kruger's exhibition of the same name, and *Climate Change is Real (Multiple)* (2017), a neon sign edition by Bowers.



Bilge Friedlaender, *Cedar Forest* (detail), 1989, nine freestanding handmade linen paper sculptures, variable dims: 34 in. ©Mira Friedlaender. All rights reserved. Courtesy The Estate of Bilge Friedlaender.

The physical art pieces that are present are expressionistic and abstract. The intoxicating knobbly free-form flow of Betsy Damon's *The Memory of Clean Water* (1985), an interpretive cast made from an evaporated river in Utah, floats down from the far corner of the gallery. Bilge Friedlaender's sculptures are biomorphic and lugubrious; *Cedar Forest* (1989) recasts a passage in Gilgamesh as an episode of male vanity rather than epic strength, and through the viscous enclosing membranes of nine fleshy linen paper cylinders, the artist seeks to re-center the Goddess Ishtar in the myth, as Mendieta seeks to rediscover her own interpretation of indigenous goddess and mother spirits in *Bacayu*. Sonya Kelliher-Combs calls attention to the devastation of her Iñupiaq and Athabascan peoples via a hybrid animal trophy/ironic nationalist object in her polar bear fur American flag, *Mark, Polar Bear* (2019) (a political riff on the impersonality of Meret Oppenheim's *Object*).



Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Mark, Polar Bear*, 2019, acrylic polymer, polar bear fur, fabric flag, metal brackets, 40 x 65 in. ©2019 Sonya Kelliher-Combs. Image courtesy of the artist and Minus Space.

The key to *ecofeminism(s)* is often carefully directed critique executed as a type of magic. Much of the investigation is ritualized. The breaking of the screen into halves and quarters in Carla Maldonado's *Dystopia of a Jungle City, and the Human of Nature* (2019), mirrors and refracts images of indigenous life on the Amazon and gently heightens the words of the interviewees and the dysfunction of Bolsonaro's cruel actions against them. Agnes Denes catalogs the three iterations of her *Rice/Tree/Burial: Preparations for the Rice Field with Irrigation System* (1977/2020); *Chaining the Sacred Forest* (1977/2020); *Burial of the Time Capsule* (1979/2020), in sets of six photographs—aiming for journalistic veracity combined with the mystic and medieval storytelling methodology of a set of panel paintings of a saint's life and miracles.



Carla Maldonado, *Dystopia of a Jungle City, and the Human of Nature*, 2019, digital video with sound, 31 min. Edition of 3 + AC. In collaboration with Cipiá Indigenous Community Center, Manaus, AM, Brazil. ©2019 Carla Maldonado. Courtesy of the artist.

Ultimately, *ecofeminism(s)* is sincerely practical: the issues of environmental over-usage, habitat desecration and cultural/racial oppression need to be solved and the wounds healed, rather than simply commemorated. Denes and Rahmani offer apotropaic solutions mostly geared towards the embodiment of healing, while Mary Mattingly and Lynn Hershman Leeson offer survival strategies. Mattingly's constructions *Microsphere: A Breathed Commune* (2012), and *Swale* (2017) seem to straddle the requirements of shelter and sustenance in the face of the seemingly inevitable and violent end of current society and the needs of a chaotic and indeterminate future. Hershman Leeson alternately seeks to remedy the situation before it's too late: *Twisted Gravity* (2020) diagrams technology Hershman has developed to clean and remove microplastics from drinking water. *Fugue in B Flat* (2016) by Jessica Segall seems to synthesize the yearning, anger and sublime desire for resolution, through unity. An upturned body of a baby grand piano finds a second life as a bee hive. It's a refuge for the bees, but via a built-in microphone we can listen to their buzzing (though they are no longer present) and the slightest hints of harmonic resonance in the strings as the bees go about their business, repairing the world.



Jessica Segall, *Fugue in B Flat*, 2016, piano, honeybees, audio, approx. 5' x 4' x 1'. ©2016 Jessica Segall. Image courtesy of the artist.

Alongside the exhibition, there is a public program of Zoom conversations with the artists. The schedule is as follows:

Wednesday, July 8, 6:30 PM EST

Lynn **Hershman Leeson**, Mary **Mattingly**, Hanae **Utamura**
Julie **Reiss**, Ph.D. (Christie's Education)
[Link to zoom](#) Meeting ID: 910 0919 3724 Password: 570290

Wednesday, July 15, 6:30 PM EST

Aviva **Rahmani**, Sonya **Kelliher-Combs**, Jessica **Segall**
[Link to zoom](#) Meeting ID: 981 2636 6765 Password: 733683

Wednesday, July 22, 6:30 PM EST

Betsy **Damon**, Eliza **Evans**, Carla **Maldonado**
Eleanor **Heartney** (art writer, contributing editor, *Art in America*)
[Link to zoom](#) Meeting ID: 961 5414 6249 Password: 959807