

# ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

JULY 9, 2020 BY NINA MDIVANI

## Confronting History through Herstory

### **ecofeminism(s) at Thomas Erben Gallery**

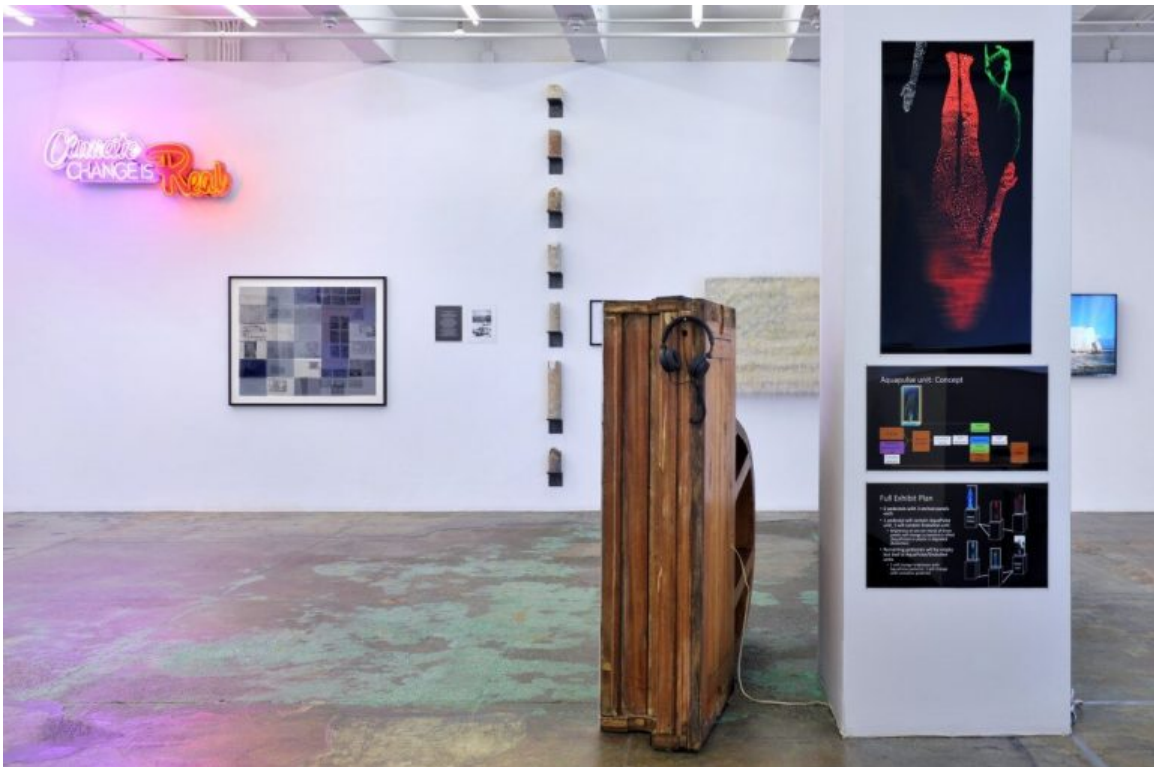


*Installation view of ecofeminism(s) curated by Monika Fabijanska, left to right: Eliza Evans, Sonya Kelliher-Combs, Hanae Utamura, Betsy Damon, Aviva Rahmani, and Jessica Segall. Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, June/July 2020 (photos: Andreas Vesterlund).*

The exhibition *ecofeminism(s)* currently on view at Thomas Erben Gallery and curated by Monika Fabijanska, brings together works of sixteen artists in graceful, yet dense and thoughtful way as a museum show would. Albeit in the gallery consistently staging pivotal and sophisticated exhibitions, including among many others shows of Senga Nengudi, Dona Nelson, *Painting Forward* and *Looped and Layered – Contemporary Art from Tehran*.

Strong curatorial positioning places the chosen artists within the context of power relations between genders, nature, and hierarchy. Women have consistently suffered and adhered to the rules produced by the male-dominated society and so did Mother Earth. Questions surrounding domination and white

(male) supremacy are relevant today, in time of country-wide social and political crisis, when outdated historical dictums and power structures are, thankfully, in the process of being revisited. Perhaps this momentum of collective reevaluation will also prompt a change in how we relate to our natural environment. This exhibition convincingly illuminates a hidden as well as evident conflict between two versions of reality: one produced by man-centered institutions and associated myths, History and idea of progress as the trajectory of civilization and one, much more subtle, Herstory, a nuanced set of ideas grounded in spiritual feminism. Spiritual feminism as well as ecofeminism believes in the alternate reading of the past, in deep interconnection between Human and Natural, with strong references to feminist land art, anti-nuclear work and ritual performances. The show examines these parallels and knots by looking at the past artworks as well as at works currently created. Attention is first guided by some of the defining works of ecofeminism pioneers Helène Aylon, Betsy Damon, Agnes Denes, Bilge Friedlaender, Barbara Kruger, Lee Hershman Leeson, Ana Mendieta, Aviva Rahmani, and Cecilia Vicuña; followed by younger practitioners Andrea Bowers, Eliza Evans, Sonya Kelliher-Combs, Carla Maldonado, Mary Mattingly, Jessica Segall, and Hanae Utamura.



*Installation view of ecofeminism(s) curated by Monika Fabijanska, left to right: Andrea Bowers, Helène Aylon, Eliza Evans, Sonya Kelliher-Combs, Hanae Utamura; foreground: Jessica Segall and Lynn Hershman Leeson. Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, June/July 2020 (photos: Andreas Vesterlund).*

Comprehensive in scope, this systematic investigation of the ecofeminist legacy from 1960s and onwards could roughly be divided into three modes of engagement, although obviously the complexity and layers of meaning of each presented work makes any such division arbitrary.

One mode taken by artists would be connecting to the surrounding environment through rituals. Among others this thread is picked by Helène Aylon's *The Earth Ambulance*, a ritualistic project that involved 'rescuing' polluted soil from locations in nuclear facilities across ten states. According to Aylon: "We, too [as Jewish refugees], would take our most precious belonging – i.e., the Earth itself, in all its variety, in our 'sac,' and carry it to safety". Similarly Hanae Utamura follows in Aylon's footsteps in *Secrete Performance Series*, 2010-2013 using her body as ritualistic vessel, partaking in the extreme environment of the Sahara desert, among others, as illustration that nothing human-created is permanent and we are mere guests, not masters.



Agnes Denes, *Rice/Tree/Burial: Burial of the Time Capsule*, 1979/2020. ©Agnes Denes. Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

Second mode of relating is through a straight-forward activism as well as through metaphoric performance as a form of activism. Eliza Evans' project, *All the Way to Hell*, 2020, was created specifically for this exhibition as she offers mineral rights of 3 acres of her land in Creek County, Oklahoma for sale to 1,000 people in order to prevent fossil fuel development in the area. This elegant activism is echoed by photographs of Agnes Denes' *Rice/Tree/Burial*, 1977, that synthesizes Land and performance arts. First documented ecological work in situ *Rice/Tree/Burial* is especially important as Denes uses symbology of

planted rice, chained trees, and buried haiku poetry to reference human interference and invention as form of resilience and resistance.



Installation view of *ecofeminism(s)* curated by Monika Fabijanska, left to right: Carla Maldonado, Mary Mattingly, and Cecilia Vicuña; sculpture: Bilge Friedlaender. Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, June/July 2020 (photos: Andreas Vesterlund)

Third, and one might argue the most intuitive way of relating to the Natural in this exhibition comes from direct aesthetic engagement through poetic symbolism and this is where the most moving works of the show emerge, at least for me. Linen and paper thin, but symbolically heavy 'trees' exquisitely created by Turkish-American minimalist Bilge Friedlaender titled *Cedar Forest*, 1989 relate to the epic of Gilgamesh. In this presentation, originally created for the 2nd International Istanbul Biennial in 1989, Friedlaender reinvents and reinterprets the figure of the goddess Ishar, casting her as an active feminist power. These works are mirrored across the room by yet another groundbreaking work by Betsy Damon, *The Memory of Clean Water*, 1985. Damon created a bulging paper pulp cast of a dry riverbed before it was dammed in Utah. Thus, preserving this tiny stream for us through using local plants for the pulp that account for striking earthy palette. Although the original stream has long being lost the cast still shimmers in the light.





*Betsy Damon, The Memory of Clean Water, 1985 (fragment of the 250ft installation, installation view, ecofeminism(s), Thomas Erben Gallery, New York 2020) ©Betsy Damon. Courtesy of the artist. (photo: Andreas Vesterlund)*

This calm and meditative show illuminates a multitude of relating to all these complex issues. Rather than comparing the artworks we observe the positions they stand for. It reminds us once again that we as individuals and women chose our mode of relating to the Natural based on our subjective calls, but it is our responsibility to do so and voice these choices.