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POEM OF THE EARTH: FROM EGO TO ECO
An intergenerational exhibition of Ecopoetic Art

Furen Dai, Lena Miskulin, Steven Siegel, Alan Sonfist, and Erin Turner

Curated by Nadine Braquetti

January 26 – April 5, 2020

Opening reception: Sunday, January 26, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

The exhibition *Poem of the Earth* investigates the themes of time and cycle, and of human and nature. It aspires to pause visitors in their daily rush and ground them in the present, at least for a fleeting moment, to appreciate a deeper connection with the natural world. The title comes from the poem *The Voice of the Rain*, taken from Walt Whitman's anthology *Leaves of Grass* (1891-92). In it, the rain describes itself as the *Poém of Earth* and illustrates its cyclical nature—how it rises as vapor out of the land and sea, and up to the sky, where it changes form and becomes cloud, before returning to the earth as rain again, to revive the soil, and give life to seeds:

The Voice of the Rain

And who art thou? said I to the soft-falling shower,
Which, strange to tell, gave me an answer, as here translated:
I am the Poém of Earth, said the voice of the rain,
Eternal I rise impalpable out of the land and the bottomless sea,
Upward to heaven, whence, vaguely formed, altogether
changed, and yet the same,
I descend to lave the drouths, atomies, dust-layers of the globe,
And all that in them without me were seeds only, latent, unborn,
And forever, by day and night, I give back life to my own origin,
and make pure and beautify it:
(For song, issuing from its birth-place, after fulfillment, wandering,
Recked or unrecked, duly with love returns.)

Walt Whitman

Referring to the rhythmic and harmonious cycles of water, nature, and life in general, Whitman's poem also expresses the interconnection between all elements on Earth.

So, too, do the artworks of the present exhibition embrace an ecocentric approach and explore the notion of cyclicity. Such works are termed "ecopoetic"—derived from the Greek *oikos*



Lena Miskulin *Ancestry*, 2018-2020



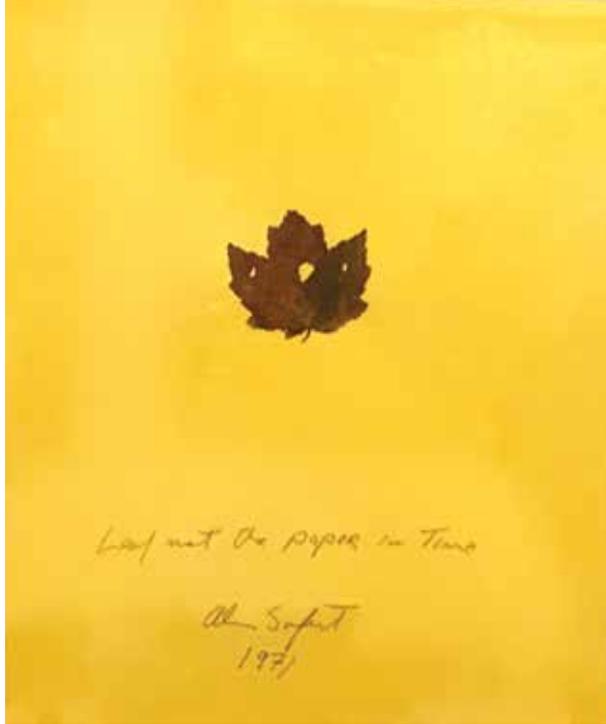
Alan Sonfist *Rock Monument of Manhattan*, 1980

(meaning the home and referring to the Earth) and *poiesis* (used to describe the activity of the maker, the poet, the artist). Ecopoetic art explores how artists can help cultivate a sense of dwelling on the Earth and a connection with nature. The name also implies the idea of recurring rhythm, as in poetry, and by extension, the concept of a cycle. The works on view call for a rejection of the traditional human-centered perspective, which has contributed to the damage inflicted on the planet. Instead, they encourage us to reconsider our relationships with other species, and to contemplate the natural world with a deepened receptiveness in order to engender more sustainable attitudes.

Embracing the ideas of sustainability in selecting artists and artworks, preference was given to local artists, reducing the carbon footprint of shipping and travel, and to works made predominantly of low environmental impact materials. The exhibition brochure will be printed on recycled paper and throughout the exhibition, recycling boxes will provide visitors a place to easily drop off small e-waste to recycle. Finally, at the end of the show, a portion of the carbon footprint of the exhibition will be balanced by a contribution to carbon offset projects through Gold Standard.

The exhibition presents a series of work by Furen Dai, Lena Miskulin, Steven Siegel, Alan Sonfist, and Erin Turner, offering an intergenerational dialogue between early and recent works and perspectives.

Lena Miskulin is a New York City-based artist inspired by the melancholic beauty she finds in



Alan Sonfist *Leaf Met the Paper in Time #1 (detail)*, 1971

transformative processes, life cycles, the metamorphoses of birth, growth, age, and decay. Frequently incorporating plants in her pieces, she aims to stress the importance of coexistence, person-to-person and person-to-nature.

She approaches sustainability as a bottom-up effort, seeing the world outside the body as an extension of all that can exist within. With this view, sustainability is a nurturing and mindful act of self and familial preservation: “I want to disseminate forward an understanding of the individual’s effects on themselves, others, and the surrounding living world,” states Miskulin, “so that through this new mindfulness and empathy, and truly, through a sensation of love and nurture, there is a newfound desire to protect and care for the human spirit and natural world, as we grow to see it within us, and see ourselves in all that is around us.”

Her sculptural installation *Ancestry* (2018-2020) welcomes the visitors as they enter the gallery. The artwork features a dress created from organic and recycled materials, suspended above living plants that grow into the piece and onto the floor and walls of the space throughout the duration of the show. It is based on a synergy between the artist and natural elements: the artist is working with living material that depend on her for care; simultaneously, these plants have their own autonomy and the power to transform the artist’s work through time. The piece engenders a reconsideration of the relationship between human and nature, and could be seen as a metaphor for their interconnection. It becomes a meditation on time, symbiosis, and humanity, and a call to grow more mindful of our relationships and engagement with the natural world.

New York-based environmental art pioneer **Alan Sonfist** has been an influential figure in the Land Art movement since the 1960s, with a practice focusing on the reintroduction of nature

into the urban landscape. Sonfist grew up in New York City near the Hemlock Forest, which he frequently explored as a child and which remains a major inspiration for him. His work has awakened awareness of the importance of ecology, and is even more relevant today, at a time when environmental issues pose more urgent significance.

Leaf met the Paper in Time (1971) is the earliest work presented in the exhibition. For each piece of the series, Sonfist featured a single real leaf placed on a sheet of dyed paper. As he explained, his first shows were more about “exposing different fragments of nature, from animals, to tree, to vegetation, anything that [he] felt that would open the door to people looking at it slightly differently.” One can imagine the now shriveled leaves slowly losing their color over time, while the man-made paper has remained quite intact.

For *Rock Monument of Manhattan* (1980), Sonfist collected core samples of stratified stone that were drilled from between 0 and 120 feet below ground level in various locations across Manhattan. This work therefore shows the geological history of NYC, and makes manifest the different cycles and times that it experienced. Sonfist explained in an interview by Robert Rosenblum published in 1990: “[My art] is about trying to uncover the natural past of our cities. I see myself as a visual archaeologist.” Looking at this work reminds the viewer of how insignificant the scale of human time is when compared to that of nature’s time.

These works allow for a direct encounter with nature within the gallery and engender thoughts about our impact on the environment. As summarized by Sonfist: “As we have entered the 21st



Erin Turner *Ephemeral Streams and Waters of the US (detail)*, 2020

century, we confront a new horizon of the way in which nature will interact with the urban environment; the essence of my art reaches to inspire a dialogue with urban dwellers regarding their impact on the Earth.”

In the main gallery, we discover *Ephemeral Streams and Waters of the US* (2020), a sculptural piece created by **Erin Turner** especially for the exhibition. It consists of many newspaper sheets in grey and blue tones that the artist repeatedly folded, twisted, and inserted into the wired structure to build a 4'x8.5'x5' object suspended from the ceiling, and reflected on the floor.

Turner is a site-specific installation artist living in New York, interested in land-based practices, preservation, and collaboration. Through symbolic narratives, her work questions place, as well as public and private land usage. The piece on view is a continuation of a collaborative artistic research project initiated in Colombia where Turner began to look at rivers through the lenses of intimacy and power. Based on weather patterns, cloud formations, and river systems, this new work creates a visual which associates clouds and rivers into a singular form.

Ephemeral Streams and Waters of the US (2020) comes with a political and social subtext. It responds to the new definitions outlined in the Trump administration's repeal of the Clean Water Act (CWA). As of September 2019, ephemeral streams, flowing only after rainfall, and intermittent streams, flowing only during certain times of the year, are no longer considered Waters of the United States (WOTUS). These streams comprise nearly 70% of all waterways in the U.S., and affect one-third of the nation's drinking water resources. The revised definition not only has health, pollution, and development implications, but it perpetuates a conception that waterways are individual and separate entities. In response to Whitman's *The Voice of Rain*, this artwork visually links the stream and the cloud as inseparable entities,



Steven Siegel *Paper #3*, 1997

enticing the viewer to become intimate with whole cycle systems, and to be aware of the power relationship that the government has with these systems.

Also in the main gallery are three early works by **Steven Siegel**, a prominent visual artist based in upstate New York, best known for his site-specific public sculptures composed of recycled materials. Although his large-scale outdoor work may be most notorious, Siegel has been making smaller pieces that share comparable materials, process, and inspirations.

For instance, *Loom* (1994) and *Tiles* (1995) are mixed-media sculptures compounded of discarded newspapers and other materials such as stones or kitchen tiles. They were constructed from the accumulation of a large number of single elements, meticulously layered to create com-

pactly striated objects. The pieces reference the slow, undetectable, cumulative, and recurrent changes that ultimately engender form in the natural world. The work requires methodical and repetitive activity, and pay homage to nature's methodology. The artist insists that his work does not intend to represent the process but to BE the process.

Often bringing together disparate elements into a unified whole, Siegel questions the boundaries between natural and man-made. The juxtaposition of industrially produced and natural materials, such as in *Tiles* (1995) refers to the way he understands nature: “I don't really believe in the word “natural”, because I believe that we are the landscape, not only by our physical presence, but also by the messes we leave and the way we reconfigure all of the material around us—the roadway to the recycling of cans to nuclear waste. Our presence is there in every molecule.” This view appreciates the whole earth as a one complex ecosystem where living species and non-living ele-



Steven Siegel *Tiles*, 1995



Steven Siegel *Loom*, 1994

ments are all interdependent. The works also reveal the artist's concern about man-induced alterations to the Earth's systems, and encourage viewers to notice the intensification of the cycle of consumption and waste, that produce a new geology when returned to the landscape.

Sharing geological characteristics with the previous works, *Paper #3* (1997) is an intimate sculptural piece made of thoroughly assembled scraps of paper, set on top of a base constructed from wood sticks. The work reminds some of Siegel's large outdoor installations, which similarly allude to geological history and the way sedimentation builds up strata over time. This piece is also intricately detailed, and reflects what he considers a priority: the aesthetic. "The generation of form is paramount for me," the artist explained. "All of my interest in science, and the politics and social and ecological issues, is there, but aesthetic concerns are at the top."

The last contribution to the show is by **Furen Dai**. Dai is an interdisciplinary artist based in New York and Boston. Her practice has focused largely on the function, usage, and history of language. Although the artist works with a range of media and artistic styles, she often returns to video as a favored material.

One Hundred Thousand Whys (2019), a film installation she made specifically for this exhibition, is presented in the project room. In this film essay, Dai takes the viewers for an intimate walk throughout New York to depict a close view of its inhabitants, their interactions, and the landscape, with a focus on nature. Nowadays, and especially in NYC, everyone lives at a fast pace, and rarely has the opportunity to slow down, to observe and to ponder their surroundings. The film is accompanied by a voiceover asking questions, such as "Why is the sky blue?", "Why does it rain?", "Why do people fall in love?". These questions encourage the audience to reflect on the way they are living in the metropolitan city, and inspire them to pay attention to their sensory perceptions. This enriched attentiveness will hopefully engender a greater connection with the environment.

BIOGRAPHY

Nadine Braquetti is an independent curator jointly based in New York and Monaco. She holds an MA in Contemporary Art from the Sotheby's Institute of Art and a Master's degree in Business Administration with specialization in International Marketing. She has lived and participated in a variety of projects, exhibitions, and events in Europe and the United States.

As a curator, she is drawn to multidisciplinary art exhibitions that enable sensory experiences and emotional responses, while exploring thought-provoking questions. Her research themes include human and nature, adversity and resilience, identity and memory, and her curatorial projects feature ecopoetic art, ephemeral art, and floral art, among others. Fascinated by the creative process, she particularly enjoys cooperating with artists on site-specific installation projects, and is inspired by the idea that arts can contribute to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Nadine is also the Program Manager for KODA, a nonprofit arts organization based in New York that facilitates solo exhibitions of contemporary art and creative residencies for mid-career artists through collaboration with socially engaged partners. She also works as a Content Marketing Consultant to help artists, art businesses, and cultural institutions with optimized web content to increase brand awareness, build reputation, and strengthen engagement.

She previously interned at the public arts nonprofit Creative Time and in the Fine Art Program and Collection at the medical center Montefiore Einstein. She has also volunteered through the Online Volunteering service of the United Nations Volunteers program on several occasions, to support organizations located in Africa.

The artist used the 16mm filmmaking technique to produce this work, which creates a rough and grainy texture and a distinctive cinematic warmth and intimacy. For this project, Dai pushed her practice beyond prescribed limits of video, employing an interdisciplinary approach that combined different mediums in unconventional ways. For instance, collages and drawings were used to slightly manipulate the film and increase its textural quality. This cross-pollination of distinct disciplines also mirrors the concept of interrelation between different elements, elaborating on the intertwining of human and nature.

In an age of environmental awareness, the artists of *Poem of the Earth* encourage a shift from the ego to the eco. Their works inspire an appreciation of the interdependence between human and non-human, as well as an awareness of the cycles of life and nature. In re-engaging with the natural world, ecopoetic art helps us to reconsider

our place on Earth, and contributes to the understanding of the common destiny for all species. This alter-narrative focused on a planetary perspective promotes a collaborative approach in order to face our modern ecological challenges. This engendered feeling of (re-)connection could ultimately activate stewardship, and potentially heal our contemporary society. ■

— Nadine Braquetti
New York City, November 2019



Furen Dai *One Hundred Thousand Whys* (video still), 2019

CHECKLIST

FUREN DAI

ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND WHYS, 2019
Video installation
10 minutes
Courtesy of the artist

LENA MISKULIN

ANCESTRY, 2018-2020
Tree branches, sticks, lace, mixed media, live plants
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

STEVEN SIEGEL

LOOM, 1994
Recycled newspapers, stones
35 x 42 1/2 x 4 inches
Courtesy of the artist

PAPER #3, 1997
Paper, wood sticks
22 1/2 x 16 1/2 x 14 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist

TILES, 1995
Recycled newspapers, tiles, stones
35 x 44 x 6 inches
Courtesy of the artist

ALAN SONFIST

LEAF MET THE PAPER IN TIME #1, 1971
Natural leaf, paper
28 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

LEAF MET THE PAPER IN TIME #2, 1971
Natural leaf, paper
28 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

LEAF MET THE PAPER IN TIME #3, 1971
Natural leaf, paper
28 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

ROCK MONUMENT OF MANHATTAN, 1980
Wood, rock drillings from 0-120 feet below Manhattan
Each: about 50 x 2 1/4 x 2 3/4 inches
Courtesy of the artist

ERIN TURNER

EPHEMERAL STREAMS AND WATERS OF THE US, 2020
Recycled newspapers, chicken wire, reflective material
48 x 102 x 60 inches (installation dimensions variable)
Courtesy of the artist

Cover: **Steven Siegel**, *Tiles* (detail), 1995

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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	Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs is partnering with the LES Ecology Center to collect and recycle e-waste items during <i>Poem of the Earth: From Ego to Eco</i> . Bring your unwanted small electronics for responsible recycling (cell phones, tablets, or that Game Boy you haven't touched in a decade) together with cables, cords, and chargers. For more information please visit www.lesecologycenter.org
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