

MOMIUS

— A RETURN TO ART CRITICISM —

New Forms for New Crises: The Need for a New Ecological Representation

BY THEA BALLARD • FEATURES, REVIEWS • APRIL 26, 2018



Cy Gavin, "Aubade II (Spittal Pond)," (2016). Image courtesy of Sargent's Daughters and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

In his recent polemic *Against the Anthropocene*, art historian T. J. Demos calls for a shift in the language we use to think through and combat contemporary environmental crises. He argues in favor of engaging with visual aesthetics – in art, but also beyond it – to address contemporary and future upheaval. To Demos, the term “Anthropocene” – the idea that we have entered a new epoch in which people are the primary influence on the biosphere, and at the moment the closest the Western Left has to a catchall framework for understanding human-wrought climate devastation – assigns responsibility evenly to all humans when it is, in fact, asymmetrically produced by a minority of particularly powerful individuals and systems.

This is the uneven ground traversed by *Between the Waters*, a small group exhibition curated by Elisabeth Sherman and Margaret Kross in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s ground floor gallery. Through painting, sculpture, and video, the show considers our changing and imperiled ecosystems. Significantly, for each of the seven artists included, place is always shaped by sociopolitical forces and histories of structural inequality. In her work *City Lights (Dead Horse Bay)* (2016), Lena Henke sculpts, in bronze and wood, the New York City skyline as molded by twentieth-century city planner Robert Moses, alluding to what was discarded in the wake of his plans. Incorporating her own studio in its topography, Henke also considers this work a self-portrait. Torkwase Dyson and Cy Gavin each paint landscapes of a sort. In the case of Dyson, fragmented and abstract oceanic imagery in her painting *Ramond (Water Table)* (2017) evokes the personal turbulence we experience in confronting what’s currently unfolding globally – at and below sea level. Gavin’s bright canvases lay glowing portraits of his ancestors over the countryside of the artist’s paternal home of Bermuda. His is a recalibrated view of an island locale whose status as a British colony and former hub of the transatlantic slave trade is generally secondary in the American imagination to its present as a major tourist destination. Erin Jane Nelson’s charmingly wonky ceramic forms, studded with glass baubles and knobs, are intended to evoke the coast of the American South and feature photographs – of graveyards, trees, raccoons or cats – layered onto their glazed surfaces. Like her fabric wall-hangings, a few of which are also on view here, her sculptures resemble the kinds of objects you would see in someone’s home.

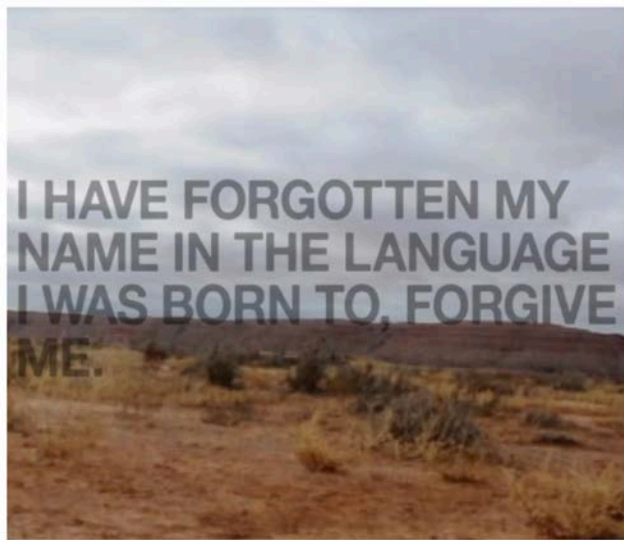


Lena Henke, "City Lights (Dead Horse Bay)" (detail), 2016.
Image courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art.

The show avoids – for reasons that might echo Demos’s logic – the term “anthropocene.” It also troubles other words we might fall back on to anchor ourselves while navigating this subject matter. Demian DinéYazhi’ is a Diné artist based in Portland, Oregon, who contributes an excellent pair of short, diaristic videos that layer poetry and personal narrative with intimate-feeling landscape images. In a roundtable between the show’s artists and curators (a [transcription of which](#) was posted to the Whitney’s website), he addressed how language is inflected by oppression. “Terms like ‘environment,’ ‘nature,’ and ‘eco-sustainability’ – all of these are Western, settler, colonial constructs,” DinéYazhi’ says. “The way nature has been built upon and settled in the New World – and has situated [us] against nature – is emblematic of all these European heritages that were about erasing the people that were indigenous to this region.” I’m reminded of the American tradition of pastoral landscape painting, including the surreal genre entries by twentieth-century artist Grant Wood, whose retrospective hangs upstairs in this museum; I also think of ways that more contemporary, and allegedly trustworthy, visual forms like documentary film, can nonetheless fail to fully depict the interweaving of historical and ongoing violences. Such erasures themselves stand to reproduce colonial ways of being.

It isn’t simply a question of whether or not particular narratives or subjectivities are represented, but *how*. Are “objective” documentary forms equipped to accommodate affective measures of human experience: to make space for pain? In the second chapter of her 2016 book *In the Wake*, Christina Sharpe critiques *The Forgotten Space*, a film essay from 2010 by Allan Sekula and Noël Burch, which considers the ocean as a locus of globalized capitalism but somehow, as Sharpe notes, fails to engage the history of transatlantic slavery. She considers Sekula and Burch’s interview with Aereile Jackson, the only Black person who speaks in the film; referred to in the credits as “former mother,” Jackson has been separated from her children for six years and, the author claims, is painfully deployed as a metaphor for the systems the filmmakers consider. “It is clear the film operates within a logic that cannot apprehend her suffering,” she writes.

It would seem that we need new logics. Still, the detached documentary mode remains a prevailing impulse for those interested in visually representing ecological crises. The examples discussed in Demos’s book are, tellingly, predominantly photographic. On a related note, an epigraph by Sekula and Burch prefaced the curatorial text for *The Ocean After Nature*, a traveling exhibition put together by Alaina Claire Feldman for Independent Curators International (its New York incarnation recently closed, and it will next appear in Xiamen, China). Sekula’s style – a matter-of-fact photograph-driven realism animated by text – loomed over that show. Though they are deployed in poetic and sometimes even fantastical ways, the exhibition’s primary vernacular was built from photographs and maps. Several large photographs by An-My Lê depict military drills in places like the Arctic or the Java Sea: shows of masculine state power exerted over striking seascapes. Yonatan Cohen and Rafi Segal’s *Territorial Map of the World* (2013) redraws map lines to account for nations’ territorial claims to the sea as well as land. And Peter Hutton’s 2007 film *At Sea* follows the life of a container ship, from its construction in a South Korean shipyard to its eventual scrapping in Bangladesh, the human figures laboring in and around it always dwarfed by its industrial presence.



Demian DineYazhi, "Rez Dog, Rez Dirt," (still), 2013. Image courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art.

These forms of documentation are certainly useful, provocative, and informative (in ways that most contemporary media covering the environment is not). But most striking about *The Ocean After Nature* were works that sought new forms. Take the inclusion of records by the Detroit techno duo Drexciya, and a related film by the Otolith Group, *Hydra Decapita* (2010). Active from the early 1990s until member James Stinson's death in 2002, Drexciya's music is part of Detroit's rich dance music history, but expands farther out into myth. As told in liner notes to their 1997 album *The Quest*, Drexciya is another world, where the descendants of those thrown from slave ships during the Middle Passage reside, having adapted to living underwater. This unfolds in rigorously conceptualized music that is complex and beautiful, but also bodily: one can dance to it, ecstatically. The essay film *Hydra Decapita* picks up this narrative (using sound, as well – its soundtrack is haunted by a recording of a woman singing lines from John Ruskin's essay "Of Water, as Painted by Turner") and connects it, through a fragmentary narrative delivered by an anonymous protagonist and punctuated by nearly-abstract images of rippling ocean, to global finance capitalism. It's of the future, or perhaps of another system of time altogether; however wild its narrative became – particularly in its invocation of a shadowy infinite, the water of Drexciya stretching forever – it felt nonetheless extremely *real*.

These practices also lay the groundwork for how we might think of technology as ecology. In James Hoff's current exhibition at [Callicoon Fine Arts](#), the ocean becomes a means to access hard data, produced by humans, collected by corporations, and eventually deployed against us. Noting how we often explain digital networks using natural metaphors, Hoff's works in this show see him taking painted seas – abstract ripples that could be snipped from a close-up of J. M. W. Turner's churning waters – and processing them through digital photography and then a malware program that distorts his images, lending them an indefinite quality. Printed on aluminum, the results are neon turquoise and magenta, and feel difficult to process, as if one's eyes were an outdated operating system unable to read his code. Like the artists in *Between the Waters*, Hoff addresses place – here by projecting the Google Maps location of the gallery onto some of the works, a layering that serves to unsettle rather than ground a viewer. Digital data is an ecology of our own invention that exists alongside, and continually disrupts, so-called "nature." Like the ocean and global capitalism, the two are tied together in ways that we often can't see or comprehend.

New visual logics or artistic forms, then, are charged with a steep task: containing both history's erasures and a hope for, or at least an inclination toward, a changed world to come. Hence, the depth of myth and the economy of layering in these artists' works. But, as with the intimate scale of Nelson's pieces in *Between the Waters*, the carry-it-with-you nature of Drexciya's music, which is certainly better enjoyed beyond the stationary confines of in-gallery headphones, or the small but pointed nature of Hoff's paintings, they also must be compact. As artists in the Whitney show pointed out in their roundtable discussion, institutions like that museum – and most of its peers, really, when we think about how inextricable the global artworld is from the fossil fuel industry – may actually be fundamentally hostile to these conversations. The most vital artworks, then, will be those that can have a life outside of such places, that might be able to adapt to – or even lay the groundwork for – a change in ways of being.