LANDSCAPE IN AN ERODED FIELD
Carol Barsha • Artemis Herber • Heather Theresa Clark
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AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM AT THE KATZEN ARTS CENTER
WASHINGTON, DC

CURATED BY LAURA ROULET
Depicting nature and the environment is one of the most ancient and elemental expressions of artmaking. From prehistoric animals drawn on cave walls, to painted landscapes and still lifes, to social practice incorporating life forms, artists have always been attentive and responsive to the world around them. Landscape in an Eroded Field brings together three women artists whose work reflects the evolution of this pictorial landscape tradition in the Anthropocene era. Carol Barsha's closely-observed nature studies and structured flowerful compositions depict the intimate environment of the domestic garden. Artemis Herber delves into classical Greek mythology to frame her monumental and metaphorical relief paintings, which reflect her concerns about the state of our present-day earth. Heather Theresa Clark is trained in ecology and green building. She combines the tools and materials of the construction industry with analog technology to create an immersive, sensory environment, using sound, water, and wind to foster greater understanding of climate change.

by Laura Roulet, Curator

CAROL BARSHA

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

Artists have long served as observers and interpreters of nature. The environment has been integrated into Western painting since antiquity, with “pure” landscapes emerging in the 16th century, meaning autonomous, topographical depictions of the natural world without an overlaid religious or mythological theme. Carol Barsha draws on the examples of Renaissance artists such as Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), who made scientifically accurate studies of nature, as well as generations of botanists, who recorded minute, naturalistic details of the world around them. Until the nineteenth century, humankind appeared to coexist harmoniously with nature.

A harbinger of the disruption of this peaceful coexistence, marking the dawn of the Anthropocene age, could be seen in J.M.W. Turner’s (1775–1851) atmospheric painting, Rain, Steam and Speed (1844), in which a coal-fired railroad train cuts a black, diagonal gash through a churning picture plane. The nineteenth century Romantic painters and poets described nature, both human and environmental, as paradoxical—rational and irrational, ordered and chaotic, pastoral and treacherous. The power and vastness of nature appears at times to overwhelm human beings.

Several of Barsha’s titles allude to the English poets William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), both sensitive to nature’s emotive beauty and fragility. Barsha’s painting Strain of the Earth’s Sweet Being (2015) borrows a line from Hopkins’s poem “Spring,” and conveys the unbridled energy of enormous flowers slipping the constraints of a lattice fence.

By the late nineteenth century, landscape painting reaches its apogee with the development of the American Hudson River School, French Impressionism, and the intimations of abstraction. Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), key in shifting the landscape tradition by fracturing, distilling, and reconstructing the natural world into geometric structure. With twentieth century Modernism, artists became more interested in the formal qualities of painting than representation. Having studied with Philip Guston (1913–1980), known for his distinctive palette and abstracted, personal imagery, Barsha constructs a pictorial reality based on observation of nature, using her own vocabulary of colors and volumes. Her palette covers a vivid spectrum of saturated hues. The flowers—rudbeckia, ranunculus, allium, zinnia—are selected for their distinctive shapes, instead of their traditional symbolic meanings. She creates her own language of flowers, marking the unfurling of ferns and the patterns of petals and pinecones. Working mainly in watercolor and ink on paper contributes to a sense of spontaneity within this order.

Birds, nests, and fences are frequent motifs. Along with the individual portraits of robins and crows, each nest is distinct. Barsha notes how people organize nature via fences and pathways, as well as nature’s way of creating structure by weaving habitats. She records the known world and its ephemeral beauty while it is still possible to enjoy it.


Carol Barsha, Strain of the Earth’s Sweet Being, 2015. Watercolor, gouache, pastel, walnut and India ink, charcoal on paper, 36 x 44 in. Courtesy of Dina El Boghdaddy and James Cooper.
From top: Carol Barsha, The World is Too Much with Us, 2018. Watercolor, gouache, pastel, walnut and India ink, collage, charcoal on paper, 38 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Neptune & Brown.

Carol Barsha, Meadow, Rudbeckia Maxima, 2019. Watercolor, gouache, walnut and India ink, charcoal on paper, 38 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Neptune & Brown.

Opposite: Carol Barsha, Barrow (For HB) (detail), 2019. Watercolor, gouache, walnut and India ink, charcoal on paper, 52 x 38 in. Courtesy of Louie and Ralph Dweck.

Earth, the beautiful, rose up
Broad-bosomed, she that is the steadfast base
Of all things. And fair Earth first bore
The starry Heaven, equal to herself,
To cover her on all sides and to be
A home forever for the blessed gods.

— Hesiod, Theogony, 8th c. BCE

Artemis Herber is doubly gifted with the Greek heritage of her mother and the German ancestry of her father. Both histories play a key role in the monumental cycle of painted reliefs created for the AU Museum. Reflecting her deep knowledge of Greek mythology, Germanic landscape tradition, and current environmental theory, Herber combines Western origin stories of mankind and the earth with a contemporary apocalyptic vision. Earth’s steadfast base is now a ravaged, abraded, and degraded beauty. Herber retells the myths of Perseus, Medusa, Poseidon, Persiphone, and Odysseus, which form the bedrock of Western culture, updating these classics into newly cautionary parables. Her starting point is the birth of Gaia, Mother Earth, who emerges from a tangled, chaotic nest to rage against human desecration of the planet.

Herber’s cyclical themes meld classicism and a revival of eighteenth century sturm und drang, with a touch of Caspar David Friedrich’s (1774–1840) Romanticism blended in. Friedrich’s nineteenth century landscapes often feature a solitary observer gazing into the sublime depths of nature, a sacred and unknowable space. Time is infinite. The Germanic intertwining of history, culture and nature takes a drastic turn in the twentieth century painting of Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945), considered the first important post-war artist to grapple with the Nazi past. Herber is clearly inspired by Kiefer’s confluence of history and landscape. Both work on a spectacular, grand scale, looking both forward and back. While Kiefer employs unconventional materials such as lead and straw, the densely layered surfaces of Herber’s tactile landscapes are built up with dirt, charcoal, and marble dust. Out of ecological consideration, Herber’s “canvas” is recycled, corrugated cardboard. She reuses other materials such as a mop, honeycomb, a woman’s nightgown, all repeatedly wet, wrung out and reassembled. This process, and the curved, enveloping, cyclorama presentation of the paintings, reinforces the theme of tectonic history repeating in an endless cycle of creation and destruction. In Herber’s work, time is mythic and geologic.
From top: Artemis Herber, Symplegaden, 2018. Acrylic on cardboard, 90 x 100 x 10 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Artemis Herber, Chaos, 2019. Acrylic and mixed media on cardboard, 90 x 120 x 5 in. Courtesy of the artist.
One or more elements of these facts have inspired artists in increasing numbers to address climate change through both traditional media of painting and sculpture as seen in Artemis Herber’s work, and new media such as Heather Theresa Clark’s social practice. Social practice actively involves people, as performers or participants or both. Two recent environmental examples are the agitation-propaganda protests of the British Extinction Rebellion (XR) group, and the experiential Lithuanian pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale. XR has staged “die-ins,” using colorful costumes, props, and people to block the streets of London, disrupting commuter traffic; and in another action, activists floated a brick suburban house down the Thames, making for a striking sight as it sank into the river. The Lithuanian contribution to the Biennale (which featured many environmentally-themed artworks and was ironically forced to close for days because of historic flooding) “Sun and Sea (Marina), was an opera sung by ordinary-looking “beach-goers,” lying on sand within the pavilion, lamenting “Songs of worry and of boredom, songs of almost nothing. And below them: the slow creaking of an exhausted Earth, a gasp.” Recognizing that the raucous, demonstrative tactics of XR can alienate viewers, and that comprehending a global phenomenon tangential to personal experience is difficult, Clark instead takes a gentle, sensory approach. The Erasure of Everyday Time installation for the AU Museum constitutes a poetic gesture of activism.

Clark doesn’t offer political or social directives. Her installation provides space for contemplation, perhaps reconnection with one’s memories of nature, perhaps consciousness awakening. The scaffolding forms a shelter, a nest, a retreat filled with natural sensations of water and wind, paradoxically produced by machines, as well as music that may seem familiar even if never heard before. The intentionally jarring soundscape, designed with assistance from Alberto Gaitán, alternates sound with music composed by Daniel Levin and much older Sacred Harp Shape Note singing. The record players, speakers, and fans are retrograde, low-tech, nostalgic. Almost everything is borrowed, including the scaffolding. Applying the environmental mantra of “reduce, recycle, reuse” to artmaking, Clark has temporarily repurposed all components of the installation, taken from the commercial flow, to create a poetic pause before returning to the upstream of the material world. As the mother of two young children, now living in rural Vermont, Clark is especially sensitive to the intergenerational component of “climate justice,” the notion that the actions or inactions of governments now will inevitably impact future generations, and poorer regions of the world. Clark’s installation uses sensation to express the existential and temporal threat of climate change. In her words, something that is “both familiar and ungraspable.”

Using the landscape tradition in art as a prism, this exhibition traces the evolution of our relationship to the environment, particularly beginning in the nineteenth century. In the Anthropocene age, human activity began to actually affect the environment. In the twenty-first century, artists strive to amplify or fathom awareness of the impact of climate change. The repeated motif of the nest as a home for birds expresses the urgency of protecting the planet as a haven for all life forms. In her work, Carol Barsha offers a recognition of nature’s existing order and beauty. Artemis Herber issues a warning through the reactivation of ancient myths, which echo every culture’s desire for essential meaning. Heather Theresa Clark composes a sensory reminder of what needs to be valued and preserved. These temporal and cyclical themes remind viewers that humans have induced this change. Destruction can lead to creation, but time is not on our side.

HEATHER THERESA CLARK

People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you?

— Greta Thunberg, speech to the United Nations, September 23, 2019

With growing political consensus that climate change is the most critical issue facing humanity today, scientists and artists struggle with how to convince skeptics to make the conceptual leap from understanding weather, an everyday local occurrence, to comprehending climate change, a global phenomenon that happens over lifetimes and millennia, but has recently accelerated at an unprecedented pace. Climate scientist Richard C. J. Somerville attempts to condense the latest assessment of the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) into a simple set of twelve facts:

1. It’s warming.
2. It’s us.
3. It hasn’t stopped.
4. The heat is mainly in the sea.
5. Sea level is rising.
6. Ice is shrinking.
7. Carbon dioxide makes oceans more acidic.
8. Carbon dioxide in the air is up 45% since the 1800s.
9. It’s now the highest in millions of years.
10. Cumulative emissions set the warming.
11. Reducing emissions limits the warming.
12. Climate change will last for centuries.

— Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, October 2019

As the mother of two young children, now living in rural Vermont, Clark is especially sensitive to the intergenerational component of “climate justice,” the notion that the actions or inactions of governments now will inequitably impact future generations, and poorer regions of the world. Clark’s installation uses sensation to express the existential and temporal threat of climate change. In her words, something that is “both familiar and ungraspable.”

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Carol Barsha
My work consists of closely observed studies from nature that, once distilled, undergo a transformation into larger-than-life versions of themselves. My aim is to explore the exquisite beauty of small details: the complex patterns and structures in the natural world, and to express my own wonder by capturing the essence of some detail and recreating it in a new way. I have been pursuing this method since I studied with my mentor and teacher, Philip Guston. “I want to paint a world as if it has never been seen before, for the first time” he said, “that’s what I have to do to make painting worthwhile.” I, too, believe in the discovery and revelation of the natural world as the object of painting.

In my paintings, flowers are vehicles that I use to inhabit a space. I take inspiration from naturalists like Danein, and am fascinated by the inherent design of spirals and sequences in the natural world. I see infinite varieties of color, and the upward force that sprouts growing up from the earth. The more time I spend outdoors, the more I feel compelled to collect specimens and create records of the infinite and wondrous details that I see every day. It is through this lens that I hope the viewer will be reminded of the awesome majesty around us in the natural world—and what could be lost.

Heather Theresa Clark
I select art, architecture and public interventions to explore and provide alternatives to what I call cultural neurosis: the human tendency to over-consume, over-build, over-groom, in lieu of direct physical exertion to ensure survival. I view this as a misdirected attempt to satisfy basic primal urges for shelter, food, and clothing in a society where actions are grossly amplified because one gallon of gasoline equals five hundred hours of human work output. In recent years, I have become increasingly interested in the connection between climate change, borders, restriction of movement, and motherhood/family life.

My work has ranged from large-scale installations in galleries to social practice. In 2013, I opened a burned building shell into an open-air theater with a living sculpture. In Neighborhoods(2019, Washington, DC; 2020, Vermont/Quebec border), filmmaker Pauline Jennings and I developed an immersive four-channel video and sound installation about borders, restriction of movement, and family/community life that focuses on a small border community in Vermont/Quebec where families affected by the trade ban are reunifying. In entry, at the Nicholson Project (a new artist in residency and community garden in Washington, DC; NE), I installed a banister that takes a wild turn and contours into a sculptural knot, hidden within which is a sound experience. Young youth from the Hirshhorn Museum’s ARTLAB created powerful original sound compositions about the challenges of growing up in Washington, DC, overlaid on sounds recorded in the neighborhood.

My work and perspective have evolved from my background in green building, urban planning, and ecology. I am a founder of Bione Studio, a design studio devoted to catalyzing built environments that power themselves, transform, waste, provide habitat, produce food, and enhance the lives of people. I am also an activist. I founded a Play for Climate Action, a family-oriented climate change protest held annually at the US Capitol by Moms Clean Air Force, a special project of the Environmental Defense Fund.

Artemis Herber
I process corrugated cardboard, the ubiquitous signature for our globalized consumerism, into large-scale multilayered paintings. Through principles of disappearance, disintegration, and de-/collage, I share an underlying tale of environmental concern embodied in a new Anthropocenic layer as a geological force transforming the planet.

Ongoing changes to our biosphere create a scorched earth of extinction, exhaustion, mining, monoculture, and neglect of endless ends on Earth through economic driven political decisions. I propose a political strategy to seek a paradigm shift towards political decisions that are motivated by environmental concerns of climate change caused by human activity that are rooted in myths and histories.

With a sense of urgency, my large-scale paintings from recycled cardboard combine artistic strategy, a deliberate use of selected materials (such as coal, marble, concrete, clays), a metaphorical language that connects research and political status quo embodied into dyssotopian metaphors with underlying myths concerning the current condition on Earth to promote a directional change of the economies towards ecological for critical political guidance. My work not only demands the viewer’s attention beyond vivid painterly brushstrokes and curated surfaces of multiple layers through principles of disintegration and reconstructions, but also the examination of current politics with emerging, intertwining themes and also narratives from deep time. Contemporary societies are still affected by older mythological substrata that carry with them the sediments of to question “prometheus” narratives of human mastery.

Biography:
Carol Barsha has exhibited at the Art Institute of Boston, the Brno Museum of the Arts, American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, and the University of Maryland College of Art, McLean Project for the Arts, Chaithaqua Exhibition of Contemporary Art, and in an installation at The Whitney Biennial. In Washington, DC, she exhibited with Gallery K, and is now represented by Gallery Neptune and Brown. She has also exhibited internationally through the Arts in Embassies Program and at The National Endowment for the Arts. In 2018 she was a Visiting Artist at The American Academy in Rome and a Resident Artist at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Ms. Barsha was a Bethesda Paintings Award semi-finalist in 2017 and received an Individual Artist Award in Painting from the Maryland State Arts Council in 2016. She earned a BFA and an MFA in Painting from Boston University College of Fine Arts where she studied with Philip Guston.

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Alberto Gaitán, Soundscape Engineer
Climate manifests in cyclical phenomena at all temporal frames of reference. These cycles interact chaotically, at times reinforcing or attenuating each other. Now comes humans, injecting the byproducts of our energy-hungry industry into this natural system. Notable among these are carbon molecules from petroleum engineering which are accelerating the environmental effects that are driving the mass extinction event we find ourselves in the midst of.

Sound also manifests as cyclical phenomena at various temporal frames of reference. These cycles interact, at times reinforcing and other times attenuating each other, sometimes in harmony and other times in dissonance. Sound art uses these nested cycles as its raw materials. Heather Theresa Clark’s piece, The Erasure of Everyday Time, includes 3 sound sources, each playing on its own programmed cycle. Wind is generated by simple fans. Water is powered by more complex pumps. Music, among the most complex of human creations, is generated by record players, machines capable of transforming the vibrations imparted onto styli by the jagged grooves cut into a vinyl record into electrical pulses measured in cycles per second that when amplified reproduce musicians’ performances with high fidelity. They play back Daniel Leon’s compositions which follow their own cycles within cycles. Whatever overlaps result will be serendipitous, with the same sonic content unlikely to repeat. At times, these sounds will seem harmonious and at other times at conflict with each other. Each sound maker will follow its own logic oblivious of the others. It will be in the observers’ ear that these cycles will coalesce into an aesthetic experience, an understanding related to their ability to deeply listen and otherwise engage with the work. The same might apply to humanity at this geologic instant. Is it within our capacity to marshal reason in a constructive manner to minimize the existential threat that the products of human technological evolution are having on our environment.

Biography:
German-born artist Artemis Herber has exhibited throughout the US, Germany, UK, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Highlights include Lost Spaces, Kunsthalle Paderborn Roof Room Installation at Munich International Airport, Cardboard City at the Goethe-Institut, Washington, DC; No Man’s Land at ArsPhare in Arlington, VA; (Un)Common Spaces at the Spartanburg Art Museum, SC; This End Up/The Art of Cardboard at the San Jose Museum of Art; National Trust’s Newark and Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum, Gloucestershire UK, and “Beyond” In Western New York” at the Albright-Knox Gallery, NY. Recent solo shows include Etacite Landscapes at McLean Projects for the Arts, VA; Autoctonif at Arlington Arts Center, VA; Shifting Identities/Humanity in Nature, Artemis Herber and Michelle Dickson at Drac液压 ArtSpace, Washington, DC; “Berlin/Board City” at Munich International Airport, Germany; “Wanderlust” at Goethe-Institut, Washington, DC; and medicinal/Estates at the San Jose Museum of Art, McLean Project for the Arts, VA, and at The American Academy in Rome. She is a 2018-2019 Hamiltonian Fellow; a 2018 Invoking the Pause Climate Change Think Tank; and the 2016 recipient of the Virginia Commission for the Arts Sculpture Fellowship Award. She is founder of Biome Studio, a design studio devoted to catalyzing built environments that power themselves, cleanse themselves, transform, waste, provide habitat, produce food, and enhance the lives of people. I am also an activist. I founded a Play for Climate Action, a family-oriented climate change protest held annually at the US Capitol by Moms Clean Air Force, a special project of the Environmental Defense Fund.

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Laura Roulet

Laura Roulet is an independent curator and writer, specializing in contemporary and Latin American art. She was one of five international curators chosen for the initial 5x5, a major public art initiative in Washington, DC. Her recent exhibitions include Ian Jehle: Dynamical Systems and Foon Sham: Escape (American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center), A Dark and Scandalous Rockfall (Mexican Cultural Institute), Brian Michael Reed’s “In the Crosscurrent” (Huntington Museum of Art, WV), and the “National Drawing Invitational” (Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AR). International exhibitions include the OAS Art Museum of the Americas as well as exhibits in Mexico City and Puerto Rico. She was a mentoring curator at the DC Arts Center and the first mentoring curator at VisArts in Rockville, MD.

She is a regular contributor to Sculpture magazine. Her catalog essay “Aglutinación: The Collective Spirit of Puerto Rican Art” is included in Relational Undercurrents, Pacific Standard Time LA/LA. Her other publications include many catalog essays, articles in American Art, Art Journal, and Art Nexus, and the book Contemporary Puerto Rican Installation Art: the Guagua Aerea, the Trojan Horse and the Termite. She worked on the Ana Mendieta retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in 2004, and contributed to that catalog.

RESOURCES
Amanda Boetke, The Ethics of Earth Art, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010.
Edith Hamilton, Mythology, Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1940.

Contributors to Heather Theresa Clark’s The Erasure of Everyday Time
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