



From The Ground Up: Women Artists Of Land Art

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Oct 8, 2023, 04:37pm EDT



Installation view, Maren Hassinger at Groundswell: Women of Land Art Nasher Sculpture Center ... [+]
PHOTO: KEVIN TODORA, COURTESY OF THE NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER

Groundswell: Women of Land Art is a milestone exhibition that just opened at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas, and that reassesses and reasserts the importance of a coterie of women in the art historical narrative of works that have been labelled as conceptual, environmental, sculptural, and even as performance. As both the introductory essay by Jeremy Strick, Director of the Nasher (who some of my readers may recall from his tenure at MOCA in LA) and the foreword by Nasher Associate Curator Dr. Leigh A. Arnold make clear, for too long the conversation about Land Art has been dominated by its male practitioners such as Robert Smithson (Spiral Jetty), Walter de Maria (Lightning Field), Michael Heizer (Levitated), James Turrell (Space that Sees). *Groundswell* intends to change that and succeeds with a very thoughtful and well curated exhibition of the work of twelve women: Artists Lita Albuquerque, Alice Ayccock, Beverly Buchanan, Agnes Denes, Maren Hassinger, Nancy Holt, Patricia Johanson, Ana Mendieta, Mary Miss, Jody Pinto, Michelle Stuart, and Meg Webster. "This exhibition presents a fuller, truer history of this pivotal movement," Strick notes in the press release. "In our time of deepening environmental crisis, *Groundswell: Women of Land Art* gathers work by 12 artists whose art powerfully provokes consideration of our relationship to the land, through both ephemeral and grand gestures. We are proud of how this exhibition presents their critical, profoundly relevant contributions." Given that many of the works presented were site specific, or ephemeral, or were vast in size, organizing a museum exhibition would appear challenging: How to show within several rooms works that existed outdoors and were created in such a fashion that they could not be perceived all at once, or that could only be experienced by engaging and interacting with the environment?

What Arnold has done, cleverly and creatively, is not to give each artist a room or a space, but rather to group artists as they manifest different aspects of land art. Accordingly, the exhibition is grouped around several thematic ideas such as "Exceeding the Field of Vision," "Charting the Land and Sky," "The Emergence of Ecological Art," "Only Connect: Art, Feminism and Ecology in the 1980s," "Land Art, Performance and the Body," "Out of Place: Indigenous Resistance, Cultural Appropriation, and Land Art Histories," and "From Land Art to Public Art." As such the works in each room are in conversation with each other, and the thematic groupings give an intellectual focus to considering the works, some of which have been reimaged for the Nasher. Others are presented via their original documentation, or by striking new color prints made from original images. So many of the concerns these artists expressed forty or fifty years ago have a new relevance, whether concerning environmental degradation, land preservation, ecology, or questions regarding indigenous land stewardship and ownership.

It also struck me that land art may have held a particular appeal to women artists who wanted to create outside of the traditional gallery and museum ecosystem and who were breaking free of the strictures of the art world and of society itself. There must have been great freedom in working in this movement – and much of their work expresses that freedom — even if in success the movement itself came to be dominated by male artists (as too often has been the case).

The Nasher Sculpture Center has also published a gorgeous hardbound catalogue of the exhibition, with a large number of color plates and black and white photos, along with an essay by Dr. Arnold, as well as essays by Scout Hutchinson, Jana La Brasca, Anna Lovatt, Jenni Sorkin, and Anne Thompson, as well as a detailed chronology, exhibition checklist, and illustrated biographies of the exhibition artists.

What struck me reading the catalogue is that, as is true with any movement, in its heyday the very making of Land Art by women was beset by political and internal debates. The issues these artists grappled with were various, such topics as: Is there a feminine dimension to the earth and environment which is being expressed in their work or is it sexist to think so? Is Land art a form for which there is parity between men and women in creating Art? Is women's Land art sufficiently diverse and inclusive? Does the land (and Land art) belong rightly to the indigenous people? Although these issues are still being debated to this day, what the perspective of time, curatorial insight, and this exhibition permits, is to put all those to one side, and just look at the work. In the end, *Groundswell* is about makers and the work on exhibit is amazing:

There are stunning prints of Lita Albuquerque's landmark 1978 "*Malibu Line*" as well as her pigment works in the Mojave Desert and Arroyo Grande. Michelle's Stuart's *Nazca Lines Star Chart* and *Nazca Lines Southern Hemisphere Constellation* 1981-82 on loan from New York's Museum of Modern Art still dazzles as beautiful and mysterious. There are photos of Alice Aycok's wondrous *Maze* constructions, her magnificent *Three Fold Manifestation II* from 1987 and also her *Low Building with Dirt Roof* from 1973 which is today in residence at New York's Storm King.

Maren Hassinger's delicate and elegant works of tree branches and wire rope placed on walls appear gestural as if the branches and the wire were brushstrokes and reads both as painting and sculpture. There are images of Jody Pinto's *Well Projects* in which she excavated 19th Century wells and cisterns and placed temporary installations of found objects and painted bundles at a Philadelphia landfill.

Agnes Denes' work such as her *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*, a 1982 installation in New York's Battery Park in the shadow of the World Trade Center, and with a view of the Statue of Liberty, remains a haunting commentary on urbanization, while her *Living Pyramid* 2015-2017 in Queens, NY calls to mind both the touristic fetishization of ruins along with our current predilection for plant-filled "living" walls and rooftops. The exhibition also features several of Denes' drawings of a re-schematized world and universe as well as her isometric reimagining of the globe that are ingenious, and sometimes quite funny.

Ana Mendieta was, like many of the land artists, ahead of her time in making her film *Silveta* with its narrative about violence against women and its traces in the primordial earth, as well as her later works that explore the connections between women's bodies, nature, and art itself.

Patricia Johnson's invitation to plan a garden at the behest of House & Gardens magazine unleashed a torrent of surreal and imaginative drawings for fantastical gardens that were never realized. The images of those drawings are a delight: inventive, satirical, and a touch mad.

Several Land Art artist installations are new, created for this exhibit – or new-ish. The late Nancy Holt's 1986 work, *Pipeline*, which referenced the Alaskan Pipeline, has been reimagined as a steel tube making Rube-Goldberg-esque turns from the Nasher's entrance through the Entrance Gallery and out to the garden; Hissinger's 1986 *Blanket of Branches*, has been adapted as a canopy of trees for the vestibule; Lita Albuquerque created a new work, *Najma Returns*, a statue of a woman covered in Albuquerque's signature deep blue pigment which greets visitors at the entrance to the exhibit; and Mary Miss has created a new work, *Stream Trace: Dallas Branch Crossing* (2023), commissioned for the exhibition. It's a site specific work that follows a buried stream that courses under the Nasher and that is marked in the garden by a series of reflective Xs before making its way out to the surrounding neighborhood.

I will leave the last word to Arnold from her catalogue essay: "...The vastness of the work and activities of women Land artists exceeds our field of vision... The story told here [is] bringing the practice of women artists back into view and revealing their radical unique and often frighteningly prescient works of art."