

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

By [Deborah Solomon](#) Oct. 18, 2023

Women of 'Groundswell': Thinking Outside the Spiral

Revisiting the land artists at the Nasher Sculpture Center, a critic finds their work was never more relevant than it is today.



Some of the women who create land art, from left: Alice Aycock, Lita Albuquerque, Patricia Johanson (in wheelchair), Jody Pinto and Mary Miss at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, where their work is celebrated. Credit...Zerb Mellish for The New York Times

The land art movement, which flourished in the '70s amid enormous media attention, at times seemed like a boys' club. When Michael Heizer dynamited the Nevada earth to create his "[Double Negative](#)," or when Robert Smithson built his "[Spiral Jetty](#)" from a 1,500-foot coil of basalt rocks on the shore of the Great Salt Lake, they expanded the proportions of contemporary art to a scale that owed as much to ancient sites like Stonehenge as to the cowboy fantasy of the infinitely expandable frontier.

Tellingly, I recently looked up the artist [Nancy Holt](#) in Robert Hughes's "American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America" (1997), one of the leading survey books on the art of this country. Its cover is graced with a sweeping nighttime view of Walter de Maria's "Lightning Field," which, conveniently, produced a flash of lightning that crackles down the book's spine.

As it turned out, Holt is not listed in the index of the book, nor is Mary Miss nor Alice Aycock. And where, for the matter, are Meg Webster, Michelle Stuart and Ana Mendieta, the Cuban American artist who once burned her silhouette into the landscape? Add to that Lita Albuquerque, Maren Hassinger, Patricia Johanson, Beverly Buchanan, Jody Pinto and Agnes Denes, the last of whom once turned Battery Park Landfill in Manhattan into a rectangle of incandescent yellow by planting two acres of wheat.

All 12 can now be found at the [Nasher Sculpture Center](#) in Dallas — in "Groundswell: Women of Land Art," a fresh and fascinating attempt to update the land-art canon. Organized by Leigh A. Arnold, the show looks back a half-century at work that is rooted in the American avant-garde of the '70s, that shaggy decade in which the rise of second-wave feminism collided with the back-to-nature ethos of hippiedom. Those two movements inform many of the works in the show, which doesn't mean they are easy to showcase. Land art glorified the ephemeral gesture over the salable art object. Some of its masterpieces blew away in the wind and survive only as photographs of remote fields taken from a helicopter at a headache-inducing angle.

Still, land art is a superb subject for reconsideration; it was never more relevant than it is today. In our age of environmental catastrophe, land art needs to be recognized and reframed as a morally precocious movement. Its practitioners were ahead of their time in understanding that caring for our home is not a matter of ordering blinds or a new fridge but of acknowledging the limited resources of the planet Earth.

The Nasher show, which extends from the museum's galleries into the oxygenated outdoors, includes a few new sculptures as well. Mary Miss, an environmentally minded sculptor of 79 who [lives in New York](#), achieves something exquisite in "Stream Trace: Dallas Branch Crossing," a multisite installation that originates in the

Solomon, Deborah. "Women of 'Groundswell': Thinking Outside the Spiral," *The New York Times*, 18 October 2023.

museum's sculpture garden and leads you [on a walk](#). (Land art was always about walking as much as looking.) A procession of stainless-steel poles crowned by shiny X's trace the path of the Dallas Branch, a still-existent stream that runs below the sculpture garden.

One theme that runs through the show, like Miss's buried stream, is the desire of a generation to escape the Minimalist box, which dominated sculpture in the '60s and filled galleries with blocky, inexpressive volumes. You can see Minimalism literally shatter into pieces in Alice Ayccock's "[Clay #2](#)," a kind of manifesto in mud. Originally done in 1971 and re-created for the Nasher show, the piece consists of a large, floor-hugging, sandbox-like structure divided into 16 evenly spaced squares, all of them filled with red clay that is still in the process of drying. The surface is full of long cracks and radiates a surprising integrity, not unlike Georgia O'Keeffe's wrinkles.