

Moya Ford, Lauren. "The Unsung Women of American Land Art," *Hyperallergic*, 14 November 2023.

# HYPERALLERGIC

Art **Reviews**

## The Unsung Women of American Land Art

*Groundswell* is a crucial reexamination of important but under-recognized artists working with the land.

Lauren Moya Ford



Maren Hassinger, *Pink Trash* (1982), installation and performance in three New York City parks (© Maren Hassinger; photo by Horace Brockington, courtesy the artist and Susan Inglett Gallery)

The mainstream history of land art in the United States has long been defined by male protagonists. Names like Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter De Maria have become shorthand for the acclaimed art movement of the 1960s and '70s, and their massive, permanent, and even earth-altering projects have come to define its characteristics. But *Groundswell: Women of Land Art*, a new exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, rewrites that history, revealing a much richer account of who makes land art and what it can be.

Curated by Leigh A. Arnold, this wide-ranging and pathbreaking exhibition features works by 12 women artists, including Ana Mendieta, Beverly Buchanan, Mary Miss, and Maren Hassinger. At a time when environmental crises demand our attention more than ever — and a growing number of female artists are belatedly gaining recognition — *Groundswell* is a crucial reexamination of important but under-recognized artists working with the land.

Land art emerged from a complex social and political milieu that included budding feminist, counter-cultural, and environmental movements, as well as currents in Minimalist and Conceptual art. It was a time of great change and possibility, but women land artists who wanted to leave the white cube gallery realm faced particular challenges. As art historian Jenni Sorkin points out in the exhibition catalogue, contractors, heavy equipment operators, masons, carpenters, and others whom land artists often needed to execute their projects were almost always men, and not all of them welcomed collaboration with women. In her essay, Sorkin includes a segment of a previously unpublished interview with Buchanan in which the artist recalled a foreman on a job site for one of her projects saying, "We were told you would probably change your mind a lot and to treat you like a woman moving furniture."

Demearing and dismissive attitudes like these often accompanied challenges in securing professional support and financial patronage for women's land art proposals. This barrier is evidenced by the markedly high number of sketches and plans for unrealized projects in the show, and the documentation of works that were completed only to be later dismantled or destroyed due to a lack of upkeep. I was especially struck by photos of "Seeded Catherine Wheel" (1982), a curious maze-like

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structure by Jody Pinto that disrupted the surrounding Pennsylvania suburbs and is one of several projects that no longer exist.

One of the strengths of *Groundswell's* reappraisal of land art is — paradoxically — that it's held inside the walls of a museum. The show's extensively researched scope connects a broad range of geographic locations, time periods, and levels of realization. Its more than 140 pieces contain sculptures, photos, videos, drawings, and — in the case of Miss's "Steam Trace: Dallas Branch Crossing" (2023) — newly commissioned, site-specific works. The complex story of women in land art gathers together in one place, condensed for our consumption.

The downside, of course, is that much of the works' power is lost when we cannot experience it in person. Many of these pieces are most fully activated when weather, landscape, and the viewer's body come together. Another issue is the installation's layout, which at times feels disjointed. Artworks in a small, dimly lit hallway on the first floor and around the stairs below are easy to miss, and a large gallery with works from the permanent collection interrupts the exhibition's flow. Signage in the space indicates that these works are meant to be related to land art, but the connections aren't apparent, and I wondered why the space wasn't utilized for the show instead. Moreover, mixing the artists' works together gives us a sense of the movement's dynamism, but makes it difficult to clearly understand the arc and motive of each individual piece.

Still, in many cases, *Groundswell* offers revelations through its presentation of unexpected, lesser-known works. For example, "Grass Breathing" (c. 1974) is a subtle and surprising Super 8 film by Ana Mendieta in which the artist lies beneath a layer of sod, the outline of her body just visible as her chest rises and falls. In Lita Albuquerque's "Washington Monument Project: The Red Pyramid" (1980), the titular structure's shadow momentarily aligns with a "V" shape that the artist has made in red pigment on the grass below. These pieces gracefully evoke weighty concerns about women's visibility, and our connection to nature and politics. They work with the land in ephemeral, intimate, and unobtrusive ways, and stand in stark contrast to more famous land art pieces, such as Smithson's 1,500-foot "Spiral Jetty" (1970) or Heizer's dynamite-blasted "Double Negative" (1969).

While the exhibition is built around revindicating and celebrating its artists, it doesn't do so uncritically. In the catalogue — perhaps the place where the project's message shines best — Arnold notes that the majority of land artists (regardless of gender) were based on the East Coast and many adopted romanticized, colonialist mindsets about the regions in which they worked, especially the American Southwest. A compelling essay by historian Scout Hutchinson shines a light on the Indigenous and Red Power political activism that overlapped with the land art movement, and calls out the common non-Native perception that the land these artists worked on was a blank canvas devoid of its own character or history.

This nuanced sensitivity is part of what makes *Groundswell* an extraordinary exhibition. Another is its wider, enriched view of land art. Mostly, though, it is the fascinating work of its 12 artists.

*Groundswell: Women of Land Art continues at the Nasher Sculpture Center (2001 Flora Street, Dallas, Texas) through January 7, 2024. The exhibition was curated by Leigh A. Arnold, Nasher associate curator.*