

VISUAL ART

“Worried Earth: Eco-Anxiety and Entangled Grief”

by Alison Gillmor

The exhibition space at Winnipeg’s Gallery 1C03 is relatively small. This seven-person show doesn’t require a lot of space, though. Instead, it needs time.



The works in “Worried Earth” aren’t straining for big, immediate impact. With subtle, quiet material presence, they stand as layered records of the artists’ processes, inviting the viewer to engage in a parallel process of meditation and mourning.

“Worried Earth” is part of a larger research project that confronts our pervasive climate anxiety, looking at rituals that help us identify, express and work through these feelings. Exhibition curator Erica Mendritzki and assistant curator Melanie Zurba, both based in Kijipuktuk/Halifax, are making an existential point about what Mendritzki eloquently terms “the impossibility of a harmless human life” in the Anthropocene era. As human activity impacts the Earth, changing the climate, polluting the oceans and driving mass extinctions, these seven artists are struggling with how to consciously create amid such heedless destruction.

Many of the works in the show exist at some fraught juncture between nature and culture, with materials that reference both the planet’s devastated ecological systems and the overflowing landfills of late-capitalist overconsumption. Many seem caught at a crucial moment of transformation, either of gradual accretion or slow rot. All seem entangled in a complex braid of guilt, grief and—possibly—hope.

Toronto-based Laura Findlay seems at first to be working closest to the Western tradition of landscape painting, with oil-on-panel close-ups of tangled gardens. But while historical landscape works tend to exist in an eternal present, these works are urgent and momentary. Nocturnal scenes are caught in a sudden camera flash—offering unsettling glimpses of overlit flower heads, a faceless bird, a pale, gleaming slug—before disappearing once more into the dark.

Xiaojing Yan, a Chinese Canadian artist now living in Toronto, also references traditional forms, with serene and symmetrical sculptural busts depicting young women. These works cede the artist’s aesthetic control to organic cycles, though. Yan packs fungal spores and wood chips into a mould, and the mixture eventually evolves into a head covered with frilled, thrusting lingzhi mushrooms and dusted with rich fungal powder. Fusing art historical references with mycelium, a complex, interactive network of fungal threads, these pieces bind the complementary communications systems of nature and art into a hybrid whole.

The photographs of Natalie Michelle Goulet offer “a brief respite from fear,” as the title of one work suggests. Affirming the physicality of analogue photography, Goulet works with expired photographic paper,



treating the images by charring them with heat or dousing them with liquid. Her process suggests the fires and floods of climate change, as scenes of forest or ocean are distorted and disrupted by worked-over textures and the eruption of intense colours, for an eerie, elegiac effect.

Winnipeg-based Connie Chappel works with materials that often come to her in serendipitous ways, given as gifts, stumbled across on a walk, unearthed after a winter storm. *Stone Lung*, a multimedia assemblage that rests humbly on the floor, starts with a tangled birch tree root that shelters a granite stone, and then extends one root into a beseeching human gesture with the addition of a mannequin hand. Chappel's fusion of organic materials with manufactured objects suggests a glint of surreal comedy but also speaks seriously to the mortality of the urban forest, and the ways the fate of the natural world is intimately intertwined with our own.

Jenine Marsh, who currently lives and works in Toronto, constructs very small assemblages that are slender and delicate but also knife-sharp. Forlorn single flowers artificially preserved under a slick layer of rubber suggest the futility of bullying ephemeral beauty into permanence, while flattened-out coins hang like strange charms—and are also scattered randomly across the gallery floor. Marsh's maiming of official currency underlines the arbitrary values of our economic systems, perhaps even suggesting an alternative to the seemingly unstoppable momentum of world-destroying extractive capitalism.

Kuh Del Rosario, based in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal, works in fertile collaboration with everyday objects. Her layered, super-compressed slabs of material blend the natural and

the synthetic, exerting a fascinating and slightly queasy pull. Dripped wax, salt crystals, driftwood, dryer lint, onion skins, shredded plastic netting, polystyrene, dried orange peel and seed pods are all retrofitted into an uncanny new reality, reminding us that the material traces of our lives on this planet don't really disappear: they just take on new forms.

Outside the gallery, on a wall across from the entrance, is the exhibition's biggest work, a large aerial photograph that references an even larger undertaking, a land art project created in 2017 by Inuvialuk artist Maureen Gruben. In *Stitching My Landscape*, 111 holes on blue-white Arctic sea ice were linked with 330 metres of blood-red cloth, suggesting both the wounding and the healing of the North's increasingly threatened skin.

In her curatorial statement, Mendritzki cautions against facing the future with either false hope or easy despair. With its thoughtful, uneasy works, "Worried Earth" confronts our feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about our damaged Earth. It offers not answers but acknowledgement. ■

"Worried Earth: Eco-Anxiety and Entangled Grief" was exhibited at 1C03, University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, from September 12, 2022, to November 10, 2022.

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1. Xiaojing Yan, *Lingzhi Girl #15*, 2020, cultivated lingzhi mushroom, wood chips and mycelium, 19 × 18 × 16 inches. Photo courtesy the artist and Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg.

2. Installation view, "Worried Earth: Eco-Anxiety and Entangled Grief," Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg, 2022. Photo: Karen Asher.