HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

Art Between Land and Self

How do we consider land-inspired art in an age when huge swaths of our shared world are being clear cut, mined, drilled, and desertified?



Alyce Santoro February 5, 2023



Installation view of Ecstatic Land at Ballroom Marfa, October 26, 2022–May 7, 2023,; (right to left, top row to bottom row) Benny Merris, "An Other Another 20" (2012); "An Other Another 48" (2014); "An Other Another 71" (2016); "An Other Another 182 (2015); "An Other Another 84" (2015); "An Other Another 70" (2016); "An Other Another 44" (2015); "An Other Another 86" (2016) (photo Heather Rasmussen, courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa)

In their exhibition statement, the curators of the multimedia exhibition *Ecstatic Land* describe having been inspired by the etymology of the word ecstatic — the Greek *ekstasis* means "to stand outside oneself." According to curators Daisy Nam and Dean Daderko, "In nature, and particularly in the vast expanses of the desert, one can experience physical contact with the earth while being emotionally and psychologically transported elsewhere." This sort of elsewhere, however, is not necessarily another physical location. For each of the artists included in the exhibition, deep immersion in their environments has caused inner and outer landscapes to merge. "Nature" comes clearly into view as a state of entanglement between the experiencer and the experienced.

The works included in *Ecstatic Land* invite us to suspend any perceived sense of individual boundary, and to become part of the landscape. This purview contrasts starkly with US and European art historical movements of the 19th and 20th centuries that objectified the surface of the earth, either by literally sculpting it or by portraying it as a scene to be gazed upon by a removed observer.

But land-inspired art in an age when huge swaths of our shared world are being clear cut, mined, drilled, and desertified is something else altogether. The luxury of detached observation does not exist at a time in which art becomes most meaningful when defaced in acts of despair and defiance against the meaningless of art on a dead planet, while multi-billionaires, desperate to save only themselves, build rockets to Mars.



Installation view of Ecstatic Land, October 26, 2022 – May 7, 2023, Ballroom Marfa (courtesy Ballroom Marfa)

Several of the works assembled for *Ecstatic Land* are posthuman odes to an era in which (some) humans have altered the very ecology and geology of an entire planet. Perhaps each of the pieces could be construed as responses, or antidotes, to the absurdity of life in such times.

In the black-and-white self-portraits of late queer Chicana photographer Laura Aguilar, the artist's nude body becomes a sculptural feature of the landscape, akin to an outgrowth or outcropping. In Christie Blizard's digital animation "Cactus" (2020), the viewer experiences a dizzying endoscopic ride through a prickly human-plant hybrid. In photographic documentation, Benny Merris's forearm painted with colorful patterns reaches out with playfulness and reverence into trees, rivers, fields, and plains.

Two works in the exhibition feature raw earthly elements as their primary materials. In its first presentation since her 2014 death, Nancy Holt's "Starfire" (1986), consisting of eight small fire pits configured in the shape of the Big Dipper and the North Star, is set ablaze after dark in the Ballroom's enclosed courtyard. In the words of the artist, "Far away suns [are] brought down to Earth in flames..."

The installation in the main gallery is anchored by a low sculptural wall, a rounded ring-shaped structure made of Marfa mud, sand, and straw by South African artist Dinco Seshee Bopape, constructed with help from local artisans. Visitors can experience the piece from the exterior or enter into the nest-like central space. Its evocative title "Lerato le le golo (…la go hloka bo kantle)" (2022) means "a great love…that has no outside" in the Sepedi language.

Most other works in Ballroom's North Gallery are photo-based. Exceptions include Teresa Baker's "Good Weather" (2021) and "Standing" (2019), maplike mixed media hangings on shaped Astroturf, and the elaborate "Electrical Lighting for Reading Room" (1985), a 20-bulb light fixture made of exposed conduit by Nancy Holt. An assortment of books on contemporary landscape art sit on a low table beneath Holt's illumination device, along with twelve accompanying simple, short wooden stools by Katherine Hubbard, whose black-and-white self-portraits taken in the Utah desert hang nearby. Among the reading materials available for perusal in the Reading Room is Nancy Holt: Sound As Sculpture, published as part of the Winter/Spring 2022 Sound as Sculpture exhibition at The Warehouse in Dallas.



Laura Ortman, performance, as part of Ecstatic Land (photo Jessica Lutz, courtesy Ballroom Marfa)

While Holt's sonic works are not part of *Ecstatic Land*, there is one audio element in the exhibition that serves to shift the experience of the space. White Mountain Apache musician, singer, and composer Laura Ortman's set of textural, atmospheric pieces for amplified violin and other electrified acoustic instruments — "Someday We'll Be Together" (2011), "THE DISREMEMBER DANCER//DIG YOUR EYES" (2018), "SLIP SIP" (2020) and "RIVERS PIERCING" (2020) — intermittently activate the gallery, revealing in those moments an otherwise hidden dimension and conjuring a wider expanse.

Among the several video works included in *Ecstatic Land*, "Nubes (Clouds)" (2019) by Genesis Báez is strikingly profound in its simplicity and impact. The camera is aimed at a cloud-filled sky infused with the sounds of a day in a rural setting: dogs, roosters, doves, owls, crickets. A Spanish-speaking voice (subtitled in English) describes the scenes playing out in the ever-morphing cloud shapes, then a fellow onlooker counters or contributes to the narrative. The viewer knows this game. The imagination is instantly activated, and it becomes impossible to resist silently playing along. Can we too see Cleveland, or a liar, in the clouds? The beauty of the game is that, given a moment to play it, each of us can catch a glimpse of ourselves projected onto the clouds. Maybe with a bit of prodding we can even see a little part of each other. The final cloud observer in the under 7-minute series of vignettes asks if we can see a woman with her hair sticking up. "But maybe you don't see like me," the voice says.

If there is any chance to temper socio-environmental catastrophe, it will only be through collective perception of ourselves as nothing other than one another and the landscape itself. Perhaps this is the true meaning of "ecstatic land."



Nubes (Clouds), 2019 from genesis baez on Vimeo



Installation view of *Ecstatic Land*, October 26, 2022 – May 7, 2023, Ballroom Marfa; Laura Aguilar, "Nature Self Portrait #1" (1996), "Motion #68" (1999), "Nature Self Portrait #12" (1996), "Nature Self Portrait #7" (1996) (photo Heather Rasmussen, courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa)



Installation view of *Ecstatic Land*, October 26, 2022 – May 7, 2023, Ballroom Marfa; (left) David Benjamin Sherry, "Ghost" (2022); (right) Teresa Baker, "Decorate" (2020) (photo Heather Rasmussen, courtesy the artists and Ballroom Marfa)



Installation view of *Ecstatic Land*, October 26, 2022 – May 7, 2023, Ballroom Marfa; Teresa Baker, "Missouri River" (2022) (photo Heather Rasmussen, courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa)



Installation view of *Ecstatic Land*, October 26, 2022 – May 7, 2023, Ballroom Marfa; Nancy Holt, "Electrical Lighting for Reading Room" (1985); Katherine Hubbard, "Clear to the legs. Clear for thighs. Your body matter." (2016) (photo Heather Rasmussen, courtesy Ballroom Marfa and Holt/Smithson Foundation)



Installation view of *Ecstatic Land*, October 26, 2022 – May 7, 2023, Ballroom Marfa; Nancy Holt, "Star Fire" (1986), from Ecstatic Land, October 26, 2022 – May 7, 2023, Ballroom Marfa (photo Heather Rasmussen, courtesy Ballroom Marfa and Holt/Smithson Foundation)



Installation view of *Ecstatic Land*, October 26, 2022 – May 7, 2023, Ballroom Marfa; Christie Blizard, "Plant Songs" (2021-2022) (photo Heather Rasmussen, courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa)

Ecstatic Land continues at Ballroom Marfa (108 E. San Antonio Street, Marfa, Texas) through May 7, 2023. The exhibition was co-organized by Dean Daderko and Daisy Nam, with assistance from Alexann Susholtz.