

Memory of Returns

Anastasiya Gutnik

University of Oregon

School of Art & Design
Terminal Project Report

Committee

Tannaz Farsi (chair)
Colin Ives
Anya Kivarkis

Table of contents

Vodonos
Fractal Beings
Liminal gestures
On coming together
Memory of Returns
The future / what if we get this right?
Works cited
Gratitude

Vodonos



Shura, family photo

I always wanted to carry my mother's family name Vodonos, which translates to water bearer in Russian. Harkening back to generations that came before me, the name traces the labor of walking which provided this essential life-force, water, for loved ones. I come from a family of matriarchs, care-takers, strong women. My great-grandmother Shura was a traveling storyteller in our hometown in the Ural Mountains of central Russia. She walked from village to village, sharing folklore with schoolchildren, Roma encampments, and surrounding farm communities. Her favorite stories came from the collection *The Malachite Casket*, based on miner's oral lore about the malachite mineral, a copper carbonate hydroxide grown in stalagmitic caverns in the veins of limestone. (Bazhov) The main story, *Mistress of Copper Mountain*, tells the tale of a young mine laborer who is asked to prove his dedication to his work. The Mistress of Copper Mountain is considered a symbol of the protector of the oppressed worker. It is no wonder, influenced by these stories, so closely tied to the landscape of the rugged Russian Urals, that the intersection of land and social justice is intimately entwined in my mind. The memories of the stunning landscape we left behind that I longed for, mixed with later understandings of the extractive practices that those hills endured as one of the largest mining sites in the world, would taint my early nostalgic reflections.

Our dacha, summer farmhouse, was located many miles from the city, nestled in dense pine and birch woods. We had a greenhouse, fruits, vegetables, and berry bushes. We exchanged food with our neighbors who had dairy and rabbits. I remember falling asleep to rain collecting in big barrels outside of our house. On wet mornings, the smell of burning pinecones in the samovar and its smoke whistle signaling tea time, coaxed me out of bed. On cold days we would visit our friends nearby and steam in their banya sweat house. These wooden pine structures were an enthralling celebration of the senses, where our bodies jolted with overwhelming heat, a place for young and old alike to detoxify, connect, and celebrate rites of passage. I keep returning to this enveloping form as an intuitive aesthetic sculptural choice in my installations.



Childhood photo, Yekaterinburg, 1992

My practice spans multiple timescales, from improvisational gestural drawing to durational performative walks that have been ongoing for years, often engaging with traces of my generational lineage. These collective walks began as an exploration of my maternal name *Vodonos* in September 2020, while carrying a white enamel basin that I found in Eugene, reminiscent of a basin I had in my childhood, left behind when I immigrated to the states.

Season after season, I returned to the same location, Dexter Reservoir in the Willamette Valley of Oregon, which I chose for its resemblance to a nostalgic mountainous valley near my childhood home. My white basin became a symbolic teleportation device, connecting me to a past moment and place that is impossible to return to. This way of working allowed meaning to evolve from the physical task of walking and the intuitive desire to return to a place, while gaining familiarity with the landscape through sensory observation and historical research over time.

I have read how trauma can be stored in our DNA, passing its influence from one generation to the next. What if it were possible to tap into other latent bodily memories, previous vocations? I returned to Dexter Reservoir reenacting my familial tie to water with gestures of care: washing, drinking, cleaning. My hands, feet, hair, and voice became tools of connection with my water-bearing ancestors.



Childhood photo, Yekaterinburg, 1992

Starting from the same point each time, I scaled the hillside of the reservoir, filling my basin with water, watching the river levels change. I observed the ebb and flow of the water levels, exposed underwater formations surfacing as the river receded, and cycles of growth of vegetation popping up along the shore. I noticed the fluttering of Fender's blue butterflies whose species are endemic to the valley move from an endangered to a threatened species during my three-year return. On several visits, the water levels made finding my starting point impossible. These moments were constant reminders of the life cycles of this site and the recognition of my presence as a visitor to this valley.

I soon began recording my experiences, and the collected videos became integrated into my thesis work, *Memory of Returns*. This video work connects the viewer to a sense of place through diegetic sounds recorded at the Middle Fork of the Willamette River: wind rattling in the background, the sound of waves at the shore. Sound activates our sense of place and becomes a visceral tie to our memories. In this video, I intermittently overlay the sounds of the river with my voice reading from my grandmother's book of photographs and poems about the rugged landscape of the Ural Mountains, *Dear Mountains of Green*. This book was a gift given to her by students before she immigrated to the United States and speaks of the ability to return to our homeland through our imaginations as long as you are able to imagine landscape from which you are from.

To the attuned Russian ear, one can hear the slight stutter in my voice as I no longer read Russian, my first language, with fluency. Language connects us to our lineage; this primal reverberation becomes a tie to past and present. Halfway through the central video screen, I begin washing clothing in my water basin, repetitively humming as I go. My mother's hands, barely visible, appear in reflection, her voice joining mine, humming as we work.



Memory of Returns, video detail, 2023

I find affinity with other artists exploring the connection between land and maternal lineage. In her piece *Inverted Horizon (Ground Zero)* artist Hanae Utamura draws a circle by scattering slaked lime on the ground as she walks a circumference, tethered to her mother at the center point. The wind spreads the lime from Utamura's hands, causing a windswept glow. The site is Rikuzentakata city in Iwate Prefecture, a coastal city in Japan a few weeks after it was hit by Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in March 2011. The circular form in both of our work reference passages of time and the continuum of life. Lime has a dual purpose: used to stimulate new growth and for embalming. This work resonates with my own interest in exploring the visible and invisible traces of memory, dualities of meaning that organic materials carry as they shapeshift from one form to the next.

Utamura is part of a contemporary wave of ecofeminist artists, who recognizes that the same power structures that exploit the natural world also cause societal injustices. *Inverted Horizon (Ground Zero)* was included in an expansive exhibition *ecofeminism(s)* at Thomas Erben Gallery in 2020, where curator Monika Fabijanska surveyed the multiple strands of ecofeminist art since its emergence in the 1960s. "Fabijanska casts ecofeminism not as a discreet movement but as an expansive concept, one that can historicize an underrecognized current in women's art and help us reimagine the role of the artist in times of collective struggle", writes Alex A. Jones in the Brooklyn Rail.

My practice draws parallels with other ecofeminist artists like Mary Mattingly, Aviva Rahmani, Agnes Denes, Terike Haapoja for work that works to decenter anthropocentrism, seeking to reposition humans as part of an interconnected natural world in times of struggle.



Hanae Utamura, *Inverted Horizon (Ground Zero)*, 2011

Fractal Beings

As our way of life is increasingly disrupted by the ramification of climate change, the realities of global displacement are looming. My arrival to Eugene in 2020 shortly before one of the largest wildfires in Oregon history tore through the McKenzie River valley placed me at the center of the very themes I had been exploring, linking concerns of land use, land stewardship, and human and non-human beings affected by the repercussions of human manipulated geographies.

In one of my first installations, *Fractal Beings*, I arranged cast vertebrae in an outward-facing radiating circle at the center of the work. I molded these small bones from the spine of animal remains found at the site of the Holiday Farm Fire years prior. The various patterns in *Fractal Beings* emerge through the process of repetition, their cast shadows on the floor and wall speak of both fragility and strength, ghosts, and presence. The long strands of grass curl outwards from the sculptural form on the floor of the LaVerne Kraus gallery, reach inwards as if in an embrace. Underneath, a wire mesh girdled with white supporting strips becomes a foundation for accumulated torn fabric, knotted, and flowing, creating both a solid structure and a permeable passageway.

In March 2023, as I began to work on this installation, Russia went to war with Ukraine and I found my half Russian, half Ukrainian family fractured, split between fearing for their lives and shrouded under a cloud of authoritarian propaganda

hellbent on denying the reality of a petro-imperial driven war. Paralyzed by what felt like the uselessness of making artwork, I began by tearing strips of fabric I had in my studio, tying knots, making patterns, unsure of the final form. The work emerged through process, as is often the case in my practice. This simple act of knotting strips of fabric and attaching them to wire mesh moved my thoughts from my head to my fingers, giving a way to mark time and form space for grief.



Fractal Beings, installation detail, 2022

Knot-tying is a signifier of labor, essential to many professionals from sailors to farmers to aerialist performers. Both a universally learned language and one that is so intimately distinctive to individuals that a knot can be used for forensic investigations, like handwriting. (Grundhauser 2017) As I accumulated my knots onto my frame, I began thinking of artists for whom knotting was central to their practice. I envisioned Cecilia Vicuña weaving her Andean quipus, a Peruvian means of record keeping, and Mrinalini Mukherjee pulling thick winding forms into being, taking up space, mimicking the energetic movement of natural formations, and Ruth Asawa winding metal wire into ovular forms, transforming the material into suspended cocoons.

In *Fractal Beings*, articulating a space through an enveloping form became a way to delineate a kind of sanctuary, referencing the traditional Russian banya, a place so culturally significant it has been referred to as “another mother”. Above the form hung a suspended plant bundle, reminiscent of a venik, a broom of branches selected for their medicinal properties used in the banya, a symbolic cleansing. This architectural structure creates a space for imagination, a place to mark important life transitions.

The title of this work references adrienne maree brown’s interpretation of fractals from her book, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. She describes fractals as a simple form that in its replication informs larger-scale complex systems they are a part of, noting that their form becomes *A structural echo that suggests two things: one, that there are shapes and patterns fundamental to our universe, and two, that what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale.* (brown 2017) Referencing naturally occurring phenomena such as the repeated patterns of fern fronds, brown points to the idea of biomimicry– looking to natural systems for inspiration on how to re-envision human connections as integral to a more just society that supports itself through decentralized methodologies.



Fractal Beings, installation detail, 2022

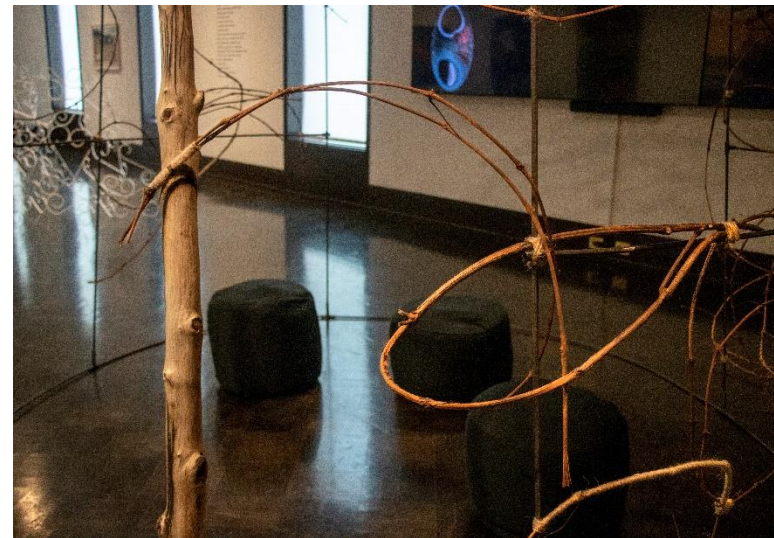
On coming together

It is impossible to extricate the trajectory of my work in the past three years without mention of the Covid pandemic, which highlighted every crack in the fiber of our society and heralded the need to double down on the importance of locality, place, and our connections to each other. If we look to the natural world for inspiration, like adrienne maree brown suggests, we see examples of mutualism everywhere.

Ecologist Suzanne Simard's groundbreaking research on trees in her book *Finding the Mother Tree* in 2021 compels us to change the way we see the natural world--as sentient, cooperative, able to remember past and present and in turn shape the future through sophisticated underground communication networks. (Simard) Through her research of mutualism between Douglas firs and Birch trees, she tracks the ways older trees share nutrients with younger trees, allowing them to flourish. This type of intelligence, previously only attributed to humans, introduces us to a type of caretaking that is quite familiar within human families.

In reflecting on her exhibition, *ecofeminism(s)*, curator Fabijanska speaks of contemporary ecofeminist practice as offering creative solutions to the calamities of our time. Imagination then becomes central to ecofeminist practice. Decentralized mutual aid, the sharing of resources among local communities, taking its inspiration from mutualism, allows neighboring communities to support one another's needs, offers one such possibility.

Arriving in Oregon during the pandemic gave few opportunities for connection. Finding my local mutual aid groups became my tie to my neighbors and the way in which I procured my materials for my early installation works. Clearing out grasses and vines from farms and backyards gave way to conversations with my neighbors, learning about their connection to the land they live on, their immigration stories. The Thompson seedless green grapevines tended out of Michael Varisco's backyard piled up in my studio, became woven into my installations and my thesis work, *Memory of Returns*. This humble vine connected a loop between two people and further, illuminated processes of domestication and global dynamics of exchange, a traceable reminder of our world-wide interconnectedness, much like the Pandemic forced us to reckon with.



Memory of Returns, grapevine detail, 2023

A common feature of contemporary ecofeminist practice is working in ways that are non-invasive to our environment, and moving away from the early land art interventions of the 1960s and 1970s that physically marked the landscape. In her series *Life of Objects*, Mary Mattingly overtly addresses economic and global supply chains by gathering her material possessions and bundling them into form that sits on top of her body. Mattingly also holds, carries and drags her accumulated mass-produced “stuff” in and out of galleries, and throughout city streets.

In an interview about her hopes for these works, she says: *I would like to speculate that future economies will be community-based and no longer revolve around mass production of physical objects. In some parts of the world the object-commodity (from clothing to furniture to vehicles) has colonized social space for centuries. I’m working toward a future when objects, their production, appropriation, distribution and consumption are thoughtfully considered.* (Lindquist and Mattingly)

Likewise, the sources of materials used in my installations become intertwined in the meaning of the work, where they come from, how they come together, and where they go after the work is deinstalled.



Mary Mattingly, *Life of Objects*, 2013

Liminal gestures

Charcoal drawing has been a constant material in my practice. My mark-making alternates from a tightly representational observation tool to a vibrating life-force that observes, mimics, and works in a call and response with organic matter. I began my observation of flora fauna in the past few years by drawing fern growth on paper, which quickly shifted to their imprints on my body, and finally were turned into digital animation through stop-motion. Through each of these iterations, I observed their gestures and the gravity with which they take up space. I wrote reflections about our shared space and their impact on my being.

This work is a meeting point, a playful gestural conversation between the plants and myself. Guided by the question of how the natural materials I use might become partners in the outcome of the work, I center questions around what materials can *do* in their coming together that they don't alone.



Observing ferns series, 2021-ongoing

Another work that explores these questions is *Underbrush, Witnessing.*, a wall drawing created by the repetition of line and form as grasses, mirroring charcoal drawings above, mimic their flow and movement. The grasses curl below a horizon line, attached in small bundles, drooping downwards with gravity. Grass shadows add another layer of form, complicating where grass ends, and trace begins. Following the McKenzie fire, renewed conversations emerged in Oregon around the dangers of fire suppression, a policy that ran counter to the Kalapuya prescribed burns that were outlawed in the 19th century. The title of this work *Underbrush, Witnessing.* gives animacy to these grasses as agents of witness, inviting us to pay closer attention to their significance.

In his book *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* ecologist David Abram reminds us of our interdependence: “All things have the capacity for speech, all beings have the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings. Indeed, what is perception if not the experience of this gregarious, communicative power of things, wherein even ostensibly 'inert' objects radiate out of themselves, conveying their shapes, hues, and rhythms to other beings and to us, influencing and informing our breathing bodies?” (Abram 2011)



Underbrush, Witnessing., Grass and charcoal drawing, [2021](#)

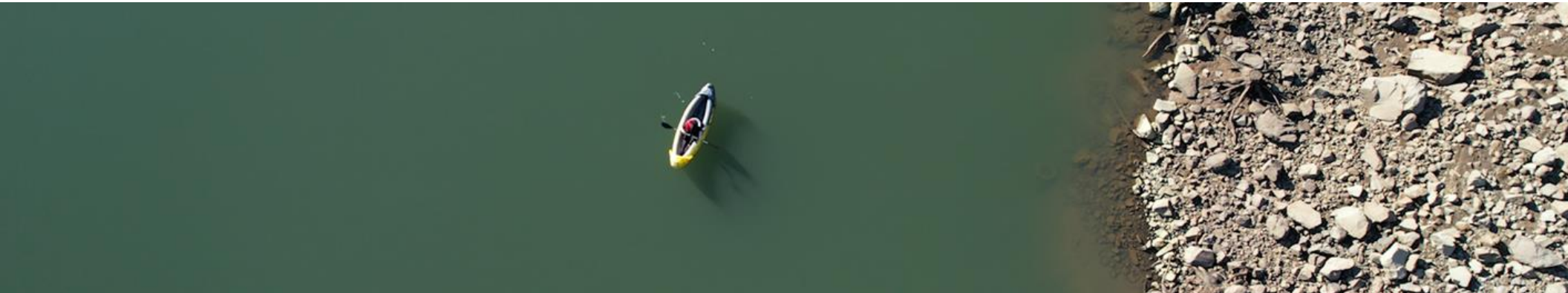
Memory of Returns

“Even while in constant motion, water is also a planetary archive of meaning and matter. To drink a glass of water is to ingest the ghosts of bodies that haunt that water. When nature calls sometime later, we return to the cistern and the sea not only our antidepressants, our chemical estrogens, or our more commonplace excretions, but also the meanings that permeate those materialities: disposable culture, medicalized problem-solving, ecological disconnect.

And that same glass of water will facilitate our movement, growth, thinking, loving. As it works its way down the esophagus, through the blood, the tissues, and to the index finger, the clavicle, and the left plantar fascia, it ensures that our being is always a becoming. An alchemist at once profoundly wondrous and entirely banal, water guides a body from young to old, from here to there, from potentiality to actuality.”

Astrida Neimanis.

Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water



Memory of Returns, video detail, 2023

Neimanis describes water, our most essential indicator of life as an archive, a connector of young and old. If we can imagine our physical bodies, memories, dreams, and perspectives as part of a recirculating system, then we can arrive at a different kind of understanding about our planetary connectedness.

My three-channel video thesis work *Memory of Returns* explores these layers of time and place through a migration story rooted in the waterways of the Willamette River Valley. Initially selected for its feeling of familiarity akin to my childhood land, I set out to return to this place with the desire to begin to know a landscape where I am transitory. I approached my journey through the site from multiple entry-points: archival research, bodily exploration, observation of flora and fauna, and through learning about the surrounding ecosystem.

The video begins with only the central channel visible, the camera vantage point positioned just above the ground, paying attention to the rocks and plants poking through. My bare feet come into visibility, taking the first steps of many repetitive walks, grounding our understanding of what we are about to witness as a journey.

The right and left screens fade in, the left begins with a school of fish slowly flowing while the right video perspective is from above, an arial view of a river dam. These shifting perspectives introduce a spectrum of vantage points of this place, connecting the migration stories of the fish that flow through this river on the left and my own body in time and space.



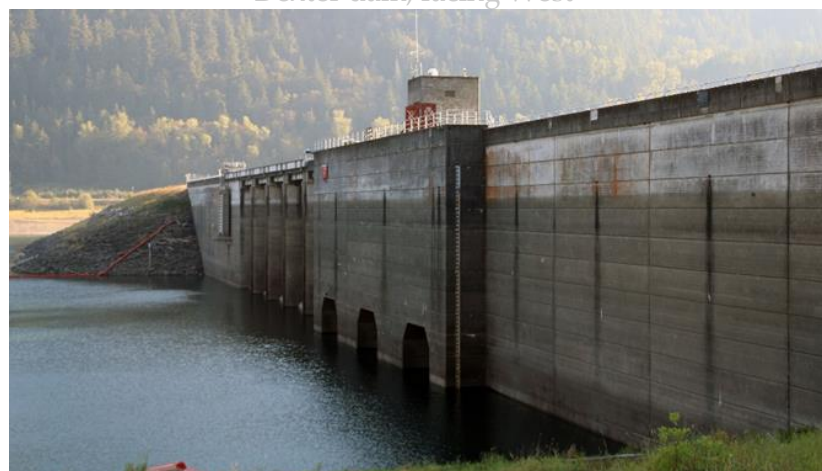
Memory of Returns, video detail, 2023

The format of the videos with their various vantage points East and West, right and left screen, began to evolve out of the complex perspectives wrapped up in the sites where they are filmed. The footage is captured at the Dexter and Fern ridge dams in the Willamette Valley, located on the Indigenous homeland of the Kalapuya peoples that was a flourishing lush landscape in the mid-1800s covered with oak, fir, and grassy prairies. During colonial settlement over the next century, farm-land began dotting the fertile land along the river and the natural flooding that occurred there for millennia now began to threaten the newly settled communities. A man-made redrawing of the path of the river and a damming system was executed to control the river flow, to prevent flooding and later provide electricity to the inhabitants. (Willamette River History)

To the east, we encounter an idyllic Western landscape with picturesque view of Mount Bachelor. To the West, another experience emerges. Dexter Dam, a foreboding concrete structure, was built in 1955 by the U.S Army Corp ominously towers over the Willamette River surrounded with no trespassing signs placed on gated entries.



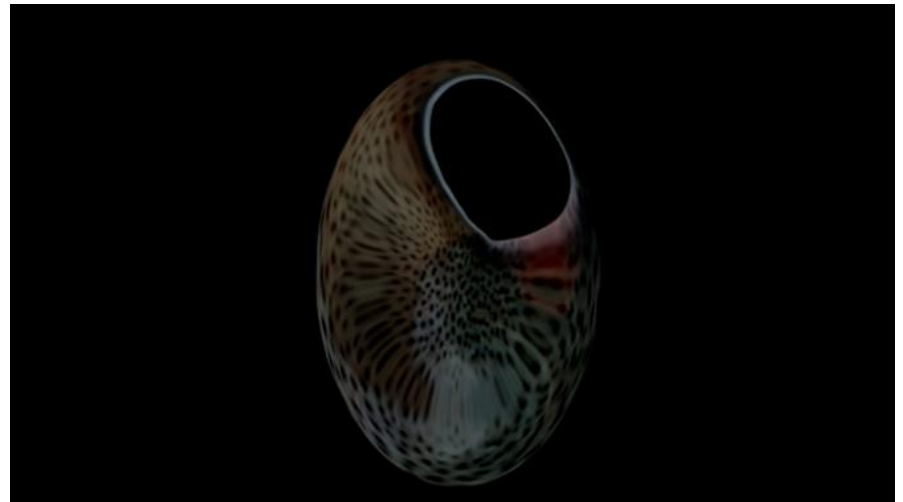
Dexter dam, facing West



Dexter dam, facing East

As awareness and recognition spreads in recent years about the ecological effects of damming systems that threaten freshwater populations, un-damming projects have begun to take place across the country. On the right screen in *Memory of Returns*, an aerial view of a dam turns into a symbolic un-damming. Drawing on top of an archival map of Dexter reservoir shortly after the completion of the dam, the charcoal frees the river from its man-made edges, spilling outwards as I contemplate what other possibilities there are for working in tandem with nature. Looking at the impermeable wall of the dam, I think, how might a sentient and breathing porous valve, like the madreporite of the starfish function instead of a concrete dam?

Meanwhile, on the left screen, a school of rainbow trout flow past the confines of the dam, once again freely able to retrace the journey trajectories that are coded in their DNA. All three screens go black and the symbolic un-damming is complete. Two rainbow trout appear on the right and left screen, morphed and into embryonic forms, spinning into a free-flowing ball of energy, full of vibrant possibilities.



Memory of Returns, video detail, 2023



Memory of Returns, video detail, 2023

I return to the idea of passageways, enveloping forms in the format of my video installation. A rounded dome made of steel, interwoven with grapevines invites the viewer to enter inside and watch the 3-channel video from multiple seating points. The vines act as open-ended frames, shifting and highlighting your view depending on your body's positioning. Two pieces of driftwood found at Dexter Reservoir stand at the opening of the dome and act as a doorway. Charcoal drawings trace and smear on the edges of the wood, integrating my gestural drawing into the sculptural form of the work, connecting the drawings we see on the screen to physical space. The open-ended materiality of the dome becomes a threshold from which to view *Memory of Returns*.

In a conversation with Krista Tippet, marine biologist Ayana Elizabeth Johnson shares a question that has become foundational for her conservation work: *what if we get this right?* (Johnson) It is a question that, amid grappling with all the calamities of our time, becomes a call for imagination, an invitation to look at the systems around us and uplift what is already working well around us. As I navigate this invitation in my practice, I hope to enter a conversation with other artists and thinkers who do the same across disciplines.

The future

Is a return. Is a residue. Is a filtration system. Is a cycle.
Is regeneration. Is seed. Is precious. Is threatened. Is.

“What time is it on the clock of the world?”

Asks Grace Lee Boggs.

The continuum hums along, stretching to infinity.

Reminding us of the spec of our own existence.

“What if we get this right?”

Asks Ayana Elizabeth Johnson

Rematriation, return.

Works cited

Abram, David. *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*. 1st Vintage Books pbk. ed. New York, Vintage Books, 2011.

"Ayana Elizabeth Johnson — What If We Get This Right? | The On Being Project." 2022. OnBeing. <https://onbeing.org/programs/ayana-elizabeth-johnson-what-if-we-get-this-right/>.

Bazhov, Pavel. *Malachite Casket: Tales from the Urals*. Fredonia Books, 2002.

brown, adrienne m. 2017. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. N.p.: AK Press.

"Finding the Mother Tree by Suzanne Simard." n.d. Suzanne Simard. Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://suzannesimard.com/finding-the-mother-tree-book>.

"Fishlake National Forest - Home." n.d. Fishlake National Forest - Home. Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/fishlake/home/?cid=STELPRDB5393641>.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2022. "Beings Seen and Unseen," An Interview with Amitav Ghosh. Emergence podcast. <https://emergencemagazine.org/interview/beings-seen-and-unseen/>.

Grundhauser, Eric. 2017. "Keeping the Art of Knot Tying Alive." Atlas Obscura. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/knots-guild-igkt-craft-art-maritime>.

Haapoja, Terike. 2021. "On Belonging." <https://www.terikehaapoja.net/on-belonging-3/>.

Jones, Alex A. "Ecofeminism(s)." *The Brooklyn Rail*, 9 July 2020, <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/07/artseen/ecofeminisms>.

Kropotkin, Peter. n.d. "Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution." Wikipedia. Accessed April 26, 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mutual_Aid:_A_Factor_of_Evolution.

Lindquist, Greg, and Mary Mattingly. "Life of Objects: An Interview with Mary Mattingly." *Art News*, 29 May 2013.

Neimanis, Astrida. "Hydrofeminism : or, on becoming a body of water." (2012).

"Willamette River History | About the Watershed | The City of Portland, Oregon." n.d. Portland.gov. Accessed May 1, 2023. <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bes/article/231478>.

Gratitude

I am once again reminded that art is a communal practice. I want to thank the following for their invaluable teachings, inspiration, and support:

Tannaz Farsi
Anya Kivarkis
Colin Ives
Marina Vodonos
Dmitriy Gutnik
Arseniy Gutnik
James Wiley
Jeremy Schropp
Reanna Schultz
Rebecca Childers
Ty Warren
Brian Gillis
Rick Silva
Ron Jude
Adam DeSorbo
Christian Alvarado
Kara Clarke
Hivemind
Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation 3544

To my MFA cohort: Lily Wai Brennan, Mary Evans, David Peña, and Will Zeng, thanks for being on this wild *Fever Dream* of a ride with me for the last three years!

Thanks to the rest of my MFA peers for making the incredible art that you do, that gave me daily inspiration!