

The Carbon Imaginary



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curated by Jeannine Bardo and John Ros

Isabella Jacob

Jemila MacEwan

Kai Franz

The Carbon Imaginary

by Jeannine Bardo

The Carbon Imaginary would then be the pulsing scarred region between Life and Non-life- an ache that makes us pay attention to a scar that has, for a long time, remained numb and dormant, which does not mean unfelt.

— Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies, A Requiem to Late Liberalism*

Do rocks listen? Can rocks die?

In our current age of the Anthropocene, a disputed term used for the geological epoch during which human activity has been the dominant influence on Earth's climate and the environment, anthropologist and critical theorist Elizabeth Povinelli, asks the above questions as a challenge to the destructive systems of settler colonialism, a form of

colonialism that seeks to replace the Indigenous population with the settler population, and late liberal capitalism by bringing into focus the relationship between Nonlife entities and Life.

Povinelli posits *The Carbon Imaginary* as an “in between”, what exists between *Bios* (Life) and *Geos* (Nonlife). This “in between” is the separation we have formed by elevating *Bios* and commodifying *Geos* as if they are separate entities instead of parts of the whole, an assemblage of living and nonliving substances that breathe in and out as one.

To most people in western cultures, life forms are often considered as having intent, maybe even souls, yet we look upon non-life entities as incapable of intent and desire, they are not endowed with self-evident truths. This constructed hierarchy of Life over Nonlife constitutes how we govern lands and resources. *Geos*, as a different or separate form of existence from humans and other organisms, fails to fit into the lexicon of Life, it refuses incorporation into the language of Western theory and liberal economics. Without a language, *Geos* cannot form a defense that holds up in the settler-colonial courts of capitalism, leading to the unmitigated exploitation and extraction of lands and the people who inhabit them.

Yet, there are those who seem to understand the inseparable connection between life and non-life entities and give voice to the *Geos* through their

stories. The Indigenous community in the Northern Territory of Australia tells a narrative of a coastal creek in Northern Australia called Tjipel that is being fought over by the native peoples who lay claim to her and the mining industries looking to explore the territory. Tjipel is believed to have existed as a young girl who at one time went hunting dressed as a boy. She encountered an old man during her travels and hid herself from him by lying on the ground to conceal the fact that she was a young woman. When the man found out she was deceiving him by hiding her gender, a fight ensued and he won. Thereafter, her existence endured in a different form by becoming the creek, the local topography that is today the subject of a legal battle.

The argument over Tjipel's legal rights in a court of law becomes the crux of a new chapter in Tjipel's existence. The court argues that in order for something to be considered an organism with legal rights, it must be an entity that is self-evident. Povinelli argues that although Tjipel is not an organism, she is an assemblage of organisms, living and non-living substances, that depend upon and orient themselves toward each other, conscious as a whole in their persistence, and given an ecological existence by Tjipel.

The question of how to give this assemblage legal rights may seem impossible until one is reminded of "mass subjects such as corporations and markets that are legally endowed with the subject-like qualities of

intention, choice and decision”,⁰¹ an assemblage of non-life entities making decisions for life itself. We’ve allowed corporate entities to exist as persons in the realm of the *Bios* by giving them the same rights reserved for the living. Now they use the same laws and language to govern and violate the *Geos*.

The stories and language of the native people who inhabit Tjipel comes from an understanding that her existence is one with theirs. The Indigenous Australians reference the landscape to figure out who and what they will become. If Tjipel were to be violated by a company looking to extract her resources, she becomes a new form of existence and “so will the humans swimming down her — they will become rich, toxic, melancholic, hungry, evil, anxious, powerful.”⁰² This new “becoming” is true of every living being on Earth and the humans who are accelerating the deep time processes of the *Geos* are quickly becoming a manifestation of their violent actions.

We need a language of the ages, an understanding of the past, an informed knowledge of the present and humanity’s role in the current collapse of ecosystems and a high regard for what that future that will be.

The artists of *The Carbon Imaginary* have their own aesthetic language that speaks of/ to and for elements of the *Geos* and the human connection to non-life entities through artistic process and use of materials. Their

work inhabits “the pulsing scarred region between Life and Nonlife” and makes us pay attention — by contributing their own literacy to the language of the *Geos*.

Past, Present and Future

Past

Isabella Jacob’s *Ice* images from her *Air-Rock-Ice* collage series uses materials with their own histories such as Braille documents, photographs, and seismic records of earthquakes — personal tokens connecting her relationship to the landscape. “The *Ice* landscapes fuse ancient geology with implied ancient human presence, atmosphere drifting, crawling rock, water in its many forms. Things loom, come into sight indistinctly, at a distance or through a fog, appear above the horizon, or in an exaggerated form or size. All push birth from the interior core outward to the surface.”

The collage process employed by Jacob, on a micro scale, can be compared to the natural formation of her ice subjects. Both Jacob’s collages and natural glaciers are compositions made of various materials, collections of debris made from cutting, tearing and fusing, the former building an image/object of a geological masterpiece and the latter cutting, carving and collecting the landscape with its enormous weight through deep

time. Jacob collects and reshapes a personal history as glaciers collect and reshape natural histories. Both collect artifacts and transport them on a journey through time.

Present

“What does a meteorite feel as it impacts this Earth?”

“How does a glacier tell its story?”

Jemila MacEwan’s work inhabits the emotional complexity of humanity’s destructive impact to the planet and to itself, by asking questions such as these, provocative questions that bequeath non-life entities, such as glaciers and meteorites, with sensory capabilities from a human perspective.

MacEwan plants her presence in the present by enacting physical interventions with the landscape. In November 2017, MacEwan dug an impact crater into the earth using only hand-tools, every day, for the duration of one lunar cycle. MacEwan gave live transmissions each morning as the *Human Meteorite*, via social media to a globally scattered audience, from her remote location in California.

MacEwan’s intervention, once a live performance, is now a video archive.

We are allowed to witness her tedious, methodical, physical assault on the earth over and over. There is a quiet beauty to this witness. Although she is creating a new scar on the land, it becomes clear that she is showing us how utterly feeble we are in the grand scheme of life and at the same time making us aware of how connected we are to the landscape. Throughout the performance, it is obvious that MacEwan has a conscious respect for the geos and the life forms it sustains as she alters its existence. The crater she carved is now left for the landscape to reclaim. “The stillness of aftermath offers us a space for reflection about how our past became our present. What it doesn’t offer is many clues to the future.” In a world in which our violence against each other is repeatedly documented via our smart phones we are also witnessing our past as our present, a history that continues to repeat itself.

MacEwan likens *Human Meteorite* to an “allegory for our collective primal fear of extinction and accepts humans as the perpetrators of the gradual destruction that brings us closer to that end.” Seeing her small body, made from the dust of long dead stars, recreating the violent impact of a meteorite may seem inane and arrogant and that is the point. We are here now and we are making our mark on this Earth in all of our self-importance, but our actions are accelerating our own end. A meteorite, a space rock, a small celestial body from the outer reaches of the solar system, can exist for billions of years before its trajectory ends in a collision with Earth. A reminder of how small we really are.

Future

Kai Franz considers his current body of work “visible as an acceleration of today — a dark residue of our current culture and technologically determined existence.” He creates sculptural forms by experimenting with a self-built machine he calls Dual-Axis Precision Deposition System, or Plopper. Franz programs digital drawings and information into the Plopper where the concept becomes a precise design, an algorithm that upon instruction produces an output of specified matter, such as sand and resin. This output, because of the properties of the materials, falls victim to invisible forces such as gravity and surface tension in the printing process and fails to reproduce the precise design computed into the program. The will of the machine “activates the will of matter” the will of matter ends up lock step in a struggle lost to chance. The machine’s directed desire is reshaped by invisible forces that create *the emergence of an otherwise*, a new existence

Franz’ *Perlin Path* is one of the objects formed from the Plopper. Suspended within a steel frame the object becomes fetishized, an arche-fossil to admire and study, an artifact of past accretions. The viewer is left with this *otherwise*, an abstraction of what could be perceived as architectural forms fused with the bones of vertebrates and the abandoned exoskeletons of invertebrates. Life and Nonlife residue bound together.

Life is not the miracle-the dynamic opposed to the inert of rocky substance. Nonlife is what holds, or should hold for us, the more radical potential. For Nonlife created what it is radically not, Life, and will in time fold this extension of itself back into itself as it has already done so often and long. It will fold its own extension back into the geological strata and rocky being, whereas Life can only fall into what already is. Life is merely a moment in the greater dynamic unfolding of Nonlife.

— Elizabeth Povinelli

The artists of *The Carbon Imaginary* pay attention to this mere moment.

01. Povinelli, Elizabeth A. *Geontologies: a Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Duke University Press, 2016. p.101.

02. Povinelli. p.102.

thoughts on artists

by John Ros

there is certainly a moment happening in terms of climate change and the killing and murdering of black people and then covid reared its ugly head and further exposed vulnerabilities. i'm thinking about these things happening — and happening close to one another. ...

this is about vulnerability and how some people are exposed to some of these issues or oppressions more than others. these people tend to be indigenous, racialized, and poor.

— ingrid waldron

Linnitt, Carol. "This Is about Vulnerability': Ingrid Waldron on the Links between Environmental Racism and Police Brutality." The Narwhal, 18 June 2020, thenarwhal.ca/vulnerability-ingrid-waldron-environmental-racism-police-brutality/.

the carbon imaginary /

we are of this ground, this earth. crumbling like leaves downward —
amassing and twirling — dancing against blue moments of sky, browning
of green land, wet black oil slicks in water, on pavement, on me. this earth
forgotten. ownership in place of stewardship. winds must act. elements
must correct.

sound and time reverberate in this space. white walls, frames, flickering
images. how might we acknowledge and act on this crisis? how might we
better understand our land? how might we reconcile how to deal with a
system of perpetual and systemic violence? on a land built of anxiety, of
hatred, of fear, of loss — how might we confront ourselves and those we
put in power? how might we retain and use our own power? how might
we gain insight onto and for our earth — for us — for those without voice?

isabella jacob /

layers equal time — slow as ice takes to gravity. s-l-o-w. methodical.

silent drips build — metronome soft staccato beat.

cube — square — □□□.

water trickles softly wetting already wet segments of float.

receding — raising — lifting — covering.

the slow comes faster than many expected. a trickle to a gushing — flush
centuries-old sediment to vapor.

echos of silent chill warm, radiant — pulsing persistent heat onto cold
ancient surface.

last drips from yesterdays inaction. oceans swell — land falls — profit over
science.

jemila macewan /

a human meteorite — arrogant — shapeshifter — earth-mover. beauty of
unveiling time — with time — dig deeper like falling. affecting land like so
many. announcing purpose. here-i-am.

digging into land — into soil — into earth :: a dream from distant
meteorite's with proper depth and width — imagined as math problems on
screen — as distant as falling matter from the spacial abyss.

monument to some — we don't belong on this land — we don't belong
here. built fantasies take hold to reconcile our misdeeds — can we be held
accountable for our fore-bearers?

crumbling sand sound falling with each dig. wetter at times. more biomes
here than drier segments. moments begin and sound-scrapes — hurling
dirt as meditative action — undoing years of a system built. forgotten.

kai franz /

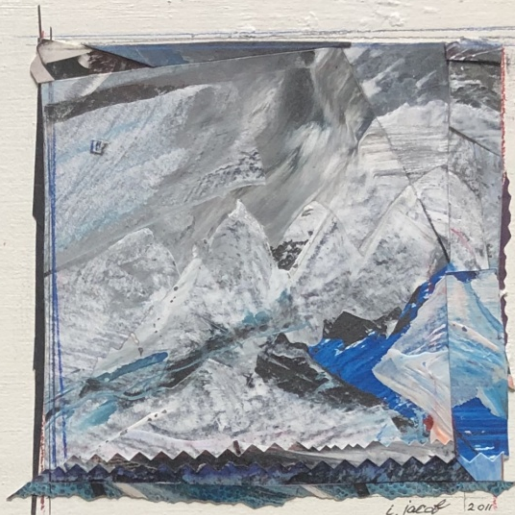
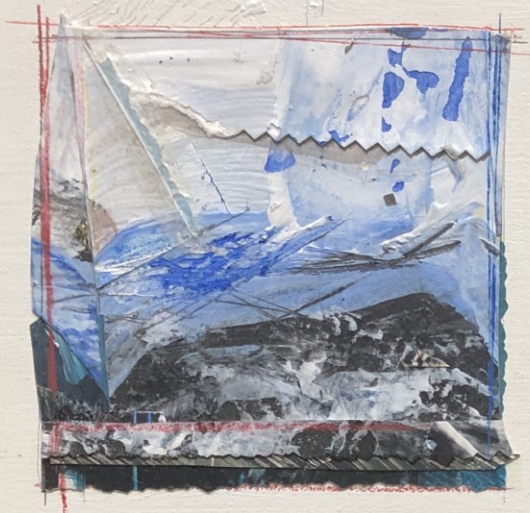
arrangements in digital — ones-and-zeros — building land. because land
is broken? making land from extracted polymers and sand? process-over-
process. in miniature, this land rises above seas, reverse-seas-rise.

meandering like specs of sand
in hourglass. falling.
waiting for time to become time.

sounding specs reverberate
symphonic pings rhythmic.

built on plastic and sand
like fill for many of our spaces —
in oceans, buried in land, mingling as
ancestors toil.

resounding tick
like time falling
the path is taken
are we too late?



c. jacob 2011



Isabella Jacob

The ritual of cutting/tearing/pasting/layering is rich and has keenly engaged me for over thirty five years. I approach collage as a live medium using new and found papers given to me by family members and friends: Braille documents, photographs, seismic records of earthquake events. The materials are infused with their own histories; sometimes I'm part of that history.

Things that loom, by definition, come into sight indistinctly, at a distance or through a fog, appear above the horizon, or in an exaggerated form or size. I work with this looming sense of landscape fusing ancient geology with implied and equally ancient human presence.

To me, the forms take on the energy of motion from one place to another: atmosphere drifting, rock shifting, the power of water in its many forms. Volumes, of either human origin or from the earth itself, seem to birth from the interior core outward to the surface.

Within the context of today's stressed environment, my landscape images aim at a heightened awareness.

isabellajacob.com



in Jacob 201





Jemila MacEwan

I am alive in a moment when the world is breathing in oxygen and exhaling fear. There is a global war, a mass crisis of environment, a deeply felt sense of uncertainty, and through it all a new kind of faith is emerging.

My work inhabits the emotional complexity of humanity's destructive impact, to the planet and to itself. In the face of environmental crises, I find myself asking questions like 'How would a glacier tell this story?' and 'What does a meteorite feel as it impacts the earth?' These perspectives help me understand what it means to be human within the present epoch of the Holocene Extinction.

In my recent work, I have created mythological narratives around meteorites, volcanoes, fault-lines and melting glaciers, where conversations with landscapes becomes the space to feel into specific emotional states brought on by a world in change. These natural phenomena require an understanding of the world through vast time-scales and the elemental and material forces capable of dramatically reshaping the environment. In my work, these forces act as a counterpoint to the unconscious and intentional impacts that humans have on the planet. Unravelling the layers of denial that separate humans from the natural environment reveals nature as a diverse network of powerful and animated forces, that deserves our attention, trust and respect. To meet the challenges of the Holocene Extinction, we need to extend our imagination of community and ancestry beyond the human to recognize our place as co-collaborators in the story of life on earth.

jemilamacewan.com





Kai Franz

For the last five years I have been working on a body of work that is based on a machine I built called Dual-Axis Precision Deposition System, or plover. The machine primarily fabricates sculptures, but occasionally also produces prints, drawings, and films. The sculptures begin as digital drawings created with computer-aided-design (CAD) software that are then fabricated through a custom computer-aided manufacturing (CAM) process. The plover, a hacked architectural plotter, first deposits sand, then drops resin onto the landscape of sand building the sculpture layer by layer. While similar to 3D printing, the technique surrenders the control implied in the CAD and CAM processes and, as the resin seeps through the sand following the path of least resistance, embraces the fluidity and unpredictability of the materials. I hope that the work feels speculative, unstable and immediate.

I like to think of the plopper as the bad conscience of formal idealism – a kind of low-res 3D printer that, as Martin Beck in his essay in my recently published book *Serial Nature* notices, “translates the smart, trim, wonderfully ideal numbers, points, lines, and algorithms into the thick, viscous, cumbersome, and opaque realm of the nexus of matter and reality”. The machine and process are designed to critique contemporary fabrication technology for its premature relationship of the physical to the digital, of virtuality to actuality, and of matter to materiality. While the plopper’s inputs, virtual 3D models and CAD drawings, are regulated by control, precision, and perfection, the machine utilizes chance, imperfection, and the will of matter as a way to overcome determination. Organic and expressive in their nature, the works never leave their diagrammatic origins entirely behind. As a result, the mechanically produced works are both informed and formless.

Often times I think of the plopps as alien spit — a reference to their serial nature, futuristic characteristics, and loose geometric qualities. Simultaneously, the works also read as remnants of some long-deceased civilization, as archeological relics, or as artifacts retrieved from the bottom of an ocean. The title for my recent exhibition at the David Winton Bell Gallery at Brown University While Still Before Us After All was an attempt to highlight and foreground this contradictory temporal dimension of the work. It was also an effort to render the body of work visible as an acceleration of today – as a dark residue of our current culture and technologically determined existence..

kaifranz.de

COVER & SECTION IMAGE /

Kai Franz, Making of *Perlin Path*, 05 July 2017.

Perlin Path, 2017. CAD drawing, CNC-code, CAM-software, plopper (dual-axis precision deposition system), polyurethane, sand, galvanized steel, 32 x 80 x 24 in.

SECTION IMAGES /

Jemila MacEwan, *Human Meteorite*, 2017, Land-art endurance performance, Outer ring: diameter 70 ft, 2.5 x 3.5 ft.; Crater: diameter 42 ft., depth 6 ft.

SECTION IMAGES /

Isabella Jacob, *Ice*, 2011, Mixed media, 12 x 12 in. (both)



Stand4 Gallery and Community Art Center
414 78th Street, Brooklyn, NY 11209

stand4gallery.org
contact@stand4gallery.org

