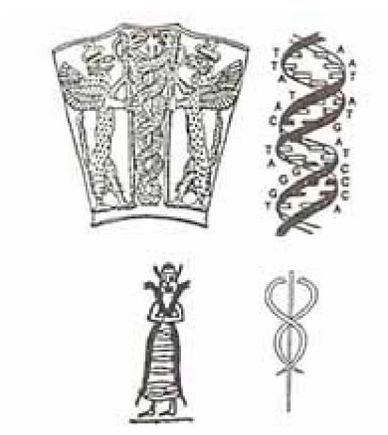


Daughters of the Western Trace



Jessie Rose Vala

Committee

ANYA KIVARKIS

RICK SILVA

YING TAN

Table of Contents

The Daughters of the Western Trace

The Passion of The Great Nothing

Vibrant matter, Ecological Disaster and the Geological Imagination

Art, Dreams, Duende and Irrational Wisdom

Artist Statement

Acknowledgments

To my family and friends.

Nancy and John O'Connor, Erika Vala,

David Vala, Robin Chilstrom, Annie Beeson, Bonnie Hawthorne,

Stephen Nachtigall and Mija

The Daughters of the Western Trace

“Amid thunder and lightning the siren is singing to attract people into the river at its deepest and most mystical point. Those who do not cry and have no fear will be rewarded with the gift of healing.” -Stella Chiweshe¹

In 2011, I lived on the top floor of a six-story apartment building in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, built in 1908. From the outside it looked like a red fort of hewn terra cotta and brick, with gargoyles and relief oak trees framed by Celtic knots looming on the sides of the building. Carved over each of the three entryways was its name “The Astral”. The Astral was built by Charles Pratt and named after Astral Oil. Sold all over the world, Astral Oil made Pratt millions. The oil of past Greenpoint is what makes this neighborhood a superfund site today.

The outside was constantly finding its way into the apartment. During winter storms, snow would blow through closed windows creating cascading mountains of snowdrift right down to the floor. The closet wall crumbled to reveal a hollow interior edged with dirt, potato bugs, and cockroaches. One evening the ceiling in the living room fell through letting the sky peer in.

I often wondered if the interior of every wall in the Astral had within it an entire ecosystem budding with life, slowly eating away at the seemingly stable lathe and plaster walls. This allowed me to reflect on the constructs we build around ourselves, so delicate, so prone to deterioration and life. This constructed reality is built through our architecture, city planning, political structures, economics, scientific study, religion, and culture.

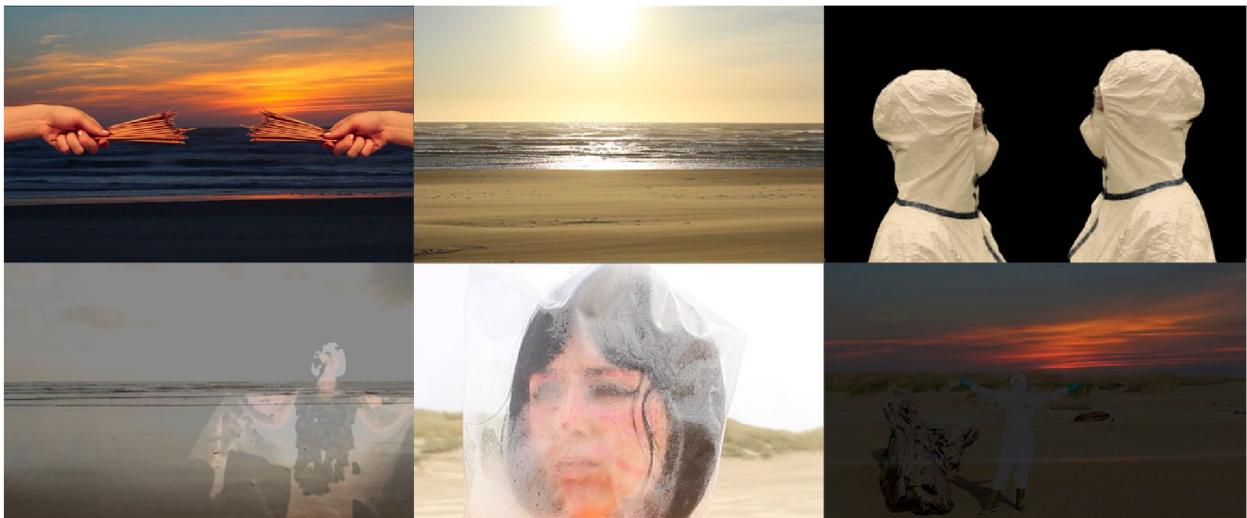
The crumbling walls and ceiling of the Astral stay with me, as do images of sinkholes and post-hurricane landscapes. These moments challenge my perception of control and drawn boundaries. Under these shifting conditions, perhaps the sky has an inherent will to collapse ceilings. From here does it not become possible to imagine that all substance has a will of its own, a life of its own that is as intimate, knowable yet unknowable as ourselves? To further this, what happens to our perception of reality with the onset of global warming, radiation fallout, the aftermath of fracked lands? Is it possible that our perception will be irrevocably shifted? How much control do we really have? How independent are we from our surroundings? And what do our surroundings desire from us? The following three sections weave personal experiences, research, and pertinent past works that consider these questions: Questions that ultimately evolved into my current thesis titled *Daughters of the Western Trace*. The fourth section will discuss this culmination and the installation of my thesis project.

¹ Stella Chiweshe. *Stella Chiweshe. Njuzu, Shungu.*, 1997, Piranha Musik. Compact disc.

The Passion of The Great Nothing

I was in the Astral when the great tsunami hit the eastern shore of Japan. My surroundings became completely still, heavy, and quiet. All the rushing of the streets' sounds traveled miles away. It seemed, and still seems a pivotal occurrence. This natural catastrophe led to a nuclear accident that was half-human and half-geologic. What we today call the Anthropocene is a dynamic that erodes the above categories of human and geologic, which in turn 'thins' preconceived boundaries between us and nature. In Japan, there is a term 'gentpatsu-shinsai' this describes a "natural" catastrophe leading to a nuclear accident, half-human, half-geologic.

This particular dynamic influenced my work entitled *The Passion of the Great Nothing*, the precursor to my thesis work, *The Daughters of the Western Trace*. Both projects deal with many similar themes and, for me, are greatly interrelated. *The Passion of the Great Nothing* is a three-channel video piece documenting a fictitious communication between distant ancestors, future grandchildren, and present workers in the context of the unstable, threatening conditions of invisible radioactive fallout spreading over the Pacific Ocean. This work aimed to engage the thin quality of the gentpatsu-shinsai catastrophe. Having the three-channels play concurrently complicated the narrative and raised many questions by which I am still fascinated. I chose to film this piece primarily on the Oregon Coast because of the shared space of the Pacific Ocean with Japan and the radioactive fallout.



Making this piece on the Oregon coast, I was haunted by the timelessness and expanse of radioactive fallout, the ways it can spread through time and space and not be seen. I likened it to a time traveler. This fallout will see far into the future, most likely existing beyond humankind, yet past generations have had prophetic visions of it as if this forceful unleashing of radiation has

been with us all along. The haunted feeling I experienced while filming informed my soundtrack composition of slow melodic synth arrangements, eerie vocals, and deep guttural bass tones.

For this installation, I projected each video channel onto an entire wall of a three-wall space to see if I could engage an experiential immersion into the concurrent, yet disparate sounds and images of these videos. Characters appear on the beach in hazmat suits (modeled after the Tepco crew), nightgowns, or shell dresses, within an intermittent image of the ocean horizon line that flows continuously from wall to wall. These anonymous characters communicate silently to each other from across the room. They hold blue safety wands as they perform visual semaphore signals, which repeat, “Oh great nothing, where is your piercing echo?...Tell me what you see vanishing and I will tell you who you are.”² The latter communication is an excerpt from W.S. Merwin’s poem titled, *For Now*. Through editing, these sentences become fragmented. Sentences begin, are disrupted by other scenes, and progress later in the sequencing.



Heal the Knife That Cuts the Wound, a talk given by Ida Soulard at the Matter of Contradiction conference in 2011, delves deeply into ‘gentpatsu-shinsai’ through an investigation of scientific data of radioactive fallout in the Pacific Ocean alongside art works taking place at the Fukushima

² Merwin, W. S., and Poets Laureate Collection. *Migration : New & Selected Poems*. Port Townsend, Wash.: Copper Canyon Press, 2005. 395.

site. One of these art works is an anonymous video of a Tepco worker at the shore of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Here a man in a hazmat suit stands at the edge of the power plant facing the ocean, he points directly at the camera for a length of time. This work informed my overall composition of having my figures stand mid-screen staring out at the camera lens.

Soulard points out in her talk that this video is reminiscent of Vito Acconci's piece, *Centers*. In this piece, Acconci's head is closely framed and his arm is pointing straight ahead at his own image on the video monitor. He attempts to keep his finger pointing on the exact center of the screen. Acconci is pointing at the viewer and simultaneously pointing at his double. This is an act of doubling, an act of perpetual feedback. Throughout my work there is a sensibility of reflection and an interest in doubling; either through a video where one eye is tightly framed, staring back out at the viewer; or the use of a mirror like platinum glaze on ceramic objects; or a costume that is made entirely of silver leaf and sequins reflecting the light back onto the environment. I am drawn to these shiny and reflective surfaces: They allow my eye to move in and out of them, the brightness of reflection pushing my focus away, while other surface areas recede in the shadows or mirror their surroundings drawing my attention. The figures in the video often become some sort of strange doubling act. They are anonymous behind masks, possibly a double for various realities of self and other.



The Blurring of Temporal Realities Through Video Art

The world of cinema is a designed world. Its unconsciousness is in one respect...inside and out, this side and that other side, life and death, you and your double, “the true story of your death”, and all others are viable in cinema, in the specular archive that extends in all directions and across all temporalities without limits.³

-Akira Mizuta Lippit

The screen is our fire, the space where we circle around to see what we are, what we can be, where we can see the past, present, and future concurrently. It has a wondrous ability of making artifice seem real, touching us in a bodily way through the flickering of the image. It can outsize us or be our perfect dimensional double. It reflects ideologies that rule our present lives. Simultaneously, it can be a window into unknown possibilities and, at its core, may have the innate ability to enforce proliferation of variable perceptions.

One of the most exquisite mirrors is the black background of the eye’s pupil. Medieval Neoplatonists practiced a meditation on the pupil. This was called mirror gazing, developing into the word ‘speculation.’ When staring into another’s eyes an occurrence of infinite reflection and dual feedback can be experienced. Lippit describes cinema as a conduit across all temporalities. We have developed the technology of the camera by mimicking the eye’s mechanics. We know of X-rays, gamma rays, elementary particles, distant galaxies, and black holes because cameras enable us to see slivers of invisible or distant realities that our eyes alone cannot perceive. This technology has aided astrophysicists to develop theories of dark matter and dark energy leading to the realization that less than five percent of the universe is visible.

The great mysteries prevail, the unseen turns out to be the fabric of the universe. How do we create relationship with the mysterious, the seemingly invisible, as well as relationships with the visible world? Keeping this thought central, there is a freedom in following other senses of intuition, prophetic visions, and the imagination. This line of questioning and the freedom it allows draws me to the play of juxtaposing imagery and movement, imagined and corporeal as a way to gain insight into the psychological and spiritual dimensions of ourselves and our surroundings. *Visions of an Obe* is a multi-channel video piece that follows a figure on an inter-determinate journey. This piece has informed my current thesis work. The videos in this work are on a loop that for me suggests cyclical time. Each sequence opens with a turning circle filled with microscopic images of minerals, overlaid is a hand playing tones on a synth. The four channels play simultaneously. This creates a cacophony of tones, building in fervor then dissipating. Often during trance rituals there is a building of percussion and song, this repetition

³Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Atomic light (shadow optics)*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2005. 74.

of sound is one of the factors that creates the space for deep trance, which is commonly associated with healing. Trance states allow for a mysterious expansion of perception. The trance inspired soundscape rises and falls as figures wander in geomorphic landscapes. The figures are filled with the same microscopic minerals that are in the opening scene. Each figure is visually made of minerals similar to the environment in which she is placed. With this choice I am suggesting possibilities of interconnectivity to ourselves and surroundings, spirit and body, and external and internal. This idea of interconnectivity and cyclicity continues to inform decisions in my thesis work through the use of multi-channel video and composite images.



Vibrant matter, Ecological Disaster and the Geological Imagination

“...a series of transitions between catastrophe and renewal, decay and regeneration, and most importantly as the instrument of a continuous future”⁴ -Rita Meyers

“Every molecule on earth has now been touched by a human.”⁵ - Matthew Coolidge

Many believe we live in a new geological epoch called the Anthropocene or age of man. This stems from the belief that human activity has irrevocably changed the composition of the

⁴ Rita Meyers, *Directions/Questions: Approaching a Future Mythology*. In *Illuminating video: an essential guide to video art*. ed. Fifer, Sally Jo, and Doug Hall. New York, N. Y.: Aperture in association with the Bay Area Video Coalition. 1990. 551.

⁵Borchard, Kurt. "Overlook: Exploring the Internal Fringes of America with the Center for Land Use Interpretation - Edited by Matthew Coolidge and Sarah Simons and Manufactured Landscapes - Directed by Jennifer Baichwal." *Sociological Inquiry* 79, no. 3 (2009): 376-80.

atmosphere, the oceans, and even the earth's crust. Humanity has become an accelerated geological force. This also means that transformations and changes occurring on a geological scale can become something humans can feel, touch and experience.

Years ago I spent time in Island in the Sky, Utah. There, I traveled just feet from closed uranium mines. Old dingy signs were placed around these sites warning to keep clear, making visible that the un-earthed uranium is still very much a vibrant, powerful radioactive force sitting at the surface. Once this uranium has been unearthed and fundamentally changed as in the case with Uranium-235 there is no going back. We have collaborated on an extremely intimate level with this element. We have created fission, a birthing from Uranium-235 creating many offspring all with varying half-lives. This includes the unique daughter Plutonium-239, an element that largely did not exist before. All of these lives have a trajectory their own, a death of their own that can withstand the will of humans. This actuality relates to ideas of vibrant matter, which refers to the philosophy of the capacity of things such as matter, storms, and minerals having an orbit and tendency of their own that can impede the force of humans.

Later, I lived in Black Mesa, Arizona, also in the Four Corners region. During this time I stayed with numerous Navajo families. I was there primarily to act as a witness to the actions of Peabody Coal Co., which owns Black Mesa Coal Mine. I was told during my stay that coal was considered the liver of the earth. Coal in the eyes of the Navajo has a life and function of its own, as important and similar in function to the liver. Through the mining of coal, and depletion of the aquifer the land is splitting apart and disease is rampant in humans and animals. It was strange to see the billowing black smoke off in the distance as I traversed a dry land with so many ever-expanding washes and rifts. Seeing the mine in the distance, the dry land underfoot, washes blocking my path I could see that these develop concurrently in relation to each other, collaborating with each other in creating a new landscape.

These experiences drew me to specific landscapes that are largely being used as an energy resource. The landscapes attract me to materials such as clay, crystals, lava rock, the costumed figure and video. Visiting and filming in these locations allows me to be a witness and collaborator in these zones. To create myths and new activity by way of costumed figures walking and engaging the land is a type of poetic activism. It is a way of seeing the landscape through a surreal, dream-like work of art. In my thesis work the use of lava rock is symbolic of the geological forces at play. It is a conduit to the land I consider and with which I am most fascinated.

Art, Dreams, Duende and Irrational Wisdom

“All of us bound together, tidal, moon-drawn, past, present and future in a break of a wave.”⁶
-Jeannette Winterson

The lasting invention of the mythic mind is essentially a poetic one, the principle of analogy. By mapping one order of reality upon another, such as sleep over death or walking over rebirth, it takes the daily and repetitive examples of ordinary life as proof of our own continuity and that of reality itself.⁷

-Rita Meyers

There is a Spanish word, duende, that speaks to the raw urge to create. Duende is in the veins, it is in the soles of the feet, the arteries of the heart, the pupil, and finger tips. El duende is the spirit of evocation. It is a summoning of spirit. It comes from the endless expanse and mystery of the soul. It is the space that cradles dying in an instant, as well as the complexity and fragility of breathing. It is the unexplainable. A vocabulary that contains this word gives agency to a poetic imagination, a place to engage the mysterious by creating strange or perplexing objects, stories, and sounds.

Timothy Morton describes the force of objects as bristling, they move outward quaking with their own surface, fragility, materiality, meanings, and relations (us being just one of them). Objects and materiality have a haptic language, they hold meaning while simultaneously they are knowable and unknowable, there is no *either or*, no polar opposites, they exist on all poles, in all in-between spaces, constantly. Considering this, objects, including the art object, navigate the irrational in our being; the dream world, the intuition, and the knowable and unknowable. They appear as they are, while being a world unto themselves just as my gut is filled with organism and life beyond my sight. Caught up in Morton’s thought is the fragility of all things, the ultimate vulnerability, the space of meeting that can destroy, create, or rearrange permanently, as in the sixth mass extinction. As Winterson alludes, we are all bound together.

I was drawn to the Oregon coast for the work, *The Passion of the Great Nothing*, for it is a space that is bound to Japan through the Pacific Ocean. Creating a piece in this landscape inspired me to visit national sacrifice zones touched by nuclear energy. I desired to experience the beauty of the landscape alongside irrevocable effects our culture, and its modern technology, has had on the environment. Collecting footage at these locations has become a way that I can imagine the complex relationship we have to ideas of nature and ourselves. In my current thesis work, I

⁶ Winterson, Jeanette. *Lighthousekeeping*. London: Fourth Estate, 2004.134.

⁷Meyers, “Directions/Questions,” 452.

follow this urge to collect imagery of specific landscapes, made characters, and sculptural forms that culminate into a multi-channel video installation.

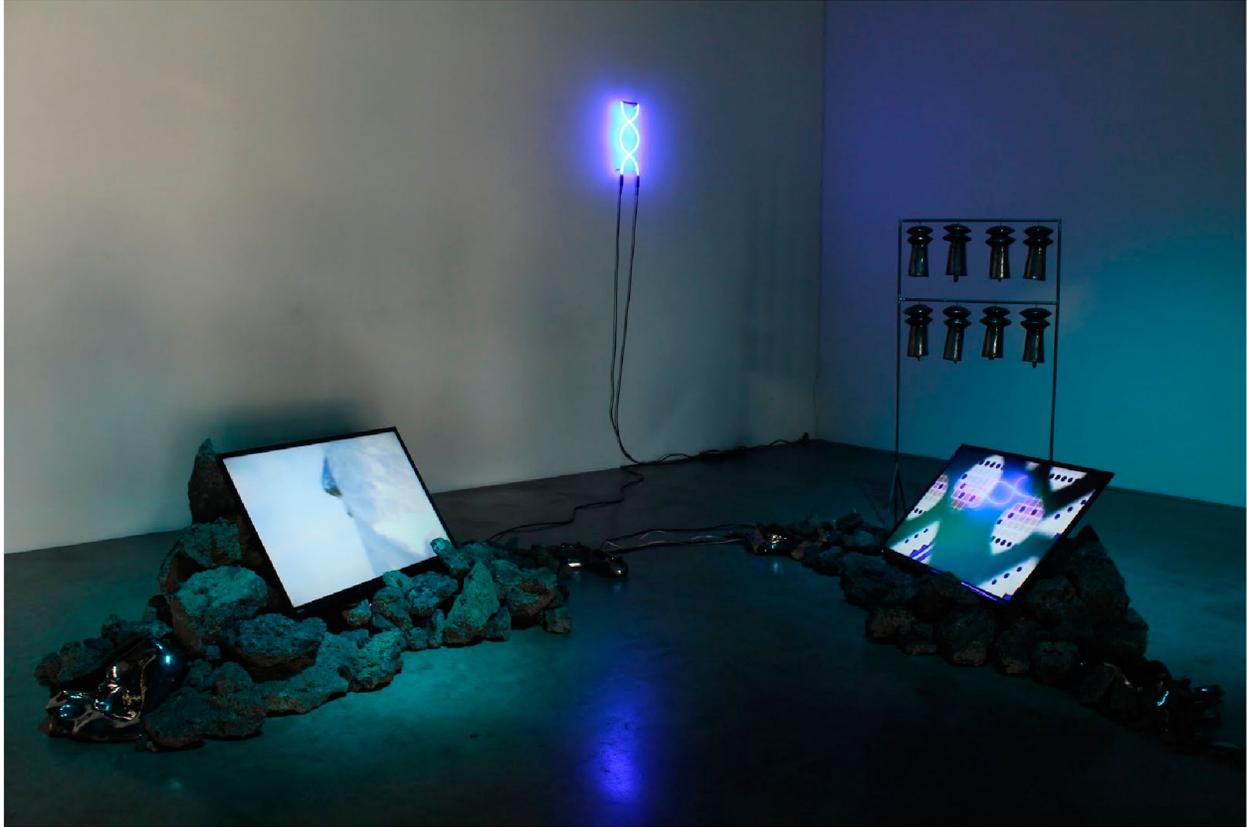


There are two journeys that take place in the piece, one to Hanford Nuclear Reservation, Washington, and another to Nevada Test Sites, Nevada. During these trips, a gathering of footage takes place. This gathering is an abstract tracing of the beginnings and resting areas of harnessed and unleashed radioactivity; a technology that by some accounts has fully placed us in the Anthropocene with the first testing of the nuclear bomb in Trinity, New Mexico, in 1945. This is an imaging based on intuition, with a strong drive to layer various found, captured and constructed imagery, landscape, and costume over and onto each other. It is a reaching for the mythic mind, mapping one order over another, the seen and unseen as viewed through surreal composite imaging. There is no strong sense of what exactly anything is, it is open ended and fragmented in the telling.



Central is a shimmering silver dragon-like character. This figure wears a silver mask and a silver-sequined lounge dress. She has glistening silver hair. In the video she stays enigmatic, although her creation was inspired by the fission (of Uranium-235) as the birthplace of the daughter, Plutonium-239. I am interested in her being metallic as a way to reflect her surroundings and because of the bright, sparkly quality of the metallic silver. These aspects speak to me about camouflaging, mimicry, and the intense bright light of nuclear activity's explosive forces. This is a personal imagining where she becomes a mythical character inspired by dragons and lounge singers. She is a conduit of a timeless force in terms of my cultural experiences. The lounge singer often has a sad and haunting tale to tell, often filled with loss. The dragon speaks of force, power, and eternity.

The video is installed on two flat screens, placed in and leaning onto piles of dark grey lava rock. Immersed in the rocks are numerous bottomless amorphous vessels made out of ceramic and glazed with shiny, metallic, platinum glaze. A soft steady dirge-like soundtrack pans from one rock pile to the other. Peeking through the rock is a glistening mirrored floor. Both screens are set at a similar height keeping with a low horizon line. A soft blue glow from vibrant, bright blue neon in the shape of the double helix sits high on the wall. Standing at the edge of a pile of lava rocks is a steel bell stand, wires spill around it with eight metallic terracotta bells hanging from its two tiers.



The dual channeled video traces four mysterious figures as they traverse and interact with the landscapes of Nevada Test Site and Hanford Reach. The images constantly blur in and out. Their forms lose their distinction, they fade, sparkle, or blur into their surroundings suggesting a line of sight that is hard to locate clearly. The figures engage with props, such as terracotta forms that mimic the forms of spent nuclear fuel rods, a ceramic death mask, severed hands, and a bell stand. The figures slowly unearth the terracotta forms, rattle the bell stand, or sit in slow meditative communication with a death mask that peers back from the ground. Threaded throughout this footage are landscape shots that harken back to romantic nature paintings. These images flicker, shake, or glow hinting at their perceived and actual instability.



A silver hand is seen in numerous scenes holding my grandfather's knife. My grandfather was an economist for the Atomic Energy Commission. Within each video there is a close framing of the hand cutting or 'un-cutting' mysterious symbols into the soft desert ground. One of these symbols is based on the monolith in Pripyat, Ukraine, which is etched with a relief triangle at its top. This structure stands in the *fall of the western trace*. This is the term given by Russian scientists of the extreme directional fallout from the Chernobyl disaster of 1986, resulting in the downfall of the newly founded town of Pripyat.

There is a recurrence of figures staring out into the landscape, or walking into the great expanse to no determined location. Two figures clothed in hazmat suits and silver death masks appear in a dry landscape slowly placing bells onto the steel stand. Simultaneously, on the concurrent channel, silver hands turn cards over revealing moving landscapes, or found animations of the interior workings of a nuclear reactor. At times the figures walk in a mysterious field of silver tags that twinkle in the wind, while the other channel displays a silver snake in the form of a double helix methodically being cut into sections as parts of a glowing blue radioactive core appear and disappear.



The two death mask figures are visually based on the Princesses Against Plutonium, a group of activists that trespassed onto Nevada Test Site in 1988, a protest that has become immortalized by artist Richard Misrach in his series, *Desert Cantos*. Misrach's photographic work evolved over two decades of trespassing onto military desert sites. His work partly reveals the

complicated history, photographic romanticism and present day use of the west. Misrach's work ultimately challenged the photographic perception of the pristine landscapes of the west. This challenging is something that I am very much engaged with in my own way. I see here in the western part of the United States a highly complex geological imagination, one that involves vibrant matter, poetic activism, and a history of sublime and picturesque depictions of the landscape.

It is at this intersection of the sheer beauty of capturing an expansive landscape—with all its historical context—along with shuttering and composite editing techniques, that I am finding a way to explore the questions I set in the beginning section. The work hopefully stays mysterious, with no clear distinction of a timeline, or solid space. The imagery is constantly shifting, each scene merging into the next with slow fades and key masks. The figures are of history, spirit, and substance, alongside rocks, landscapes, and technology. Everything is a player.





Artist Statement

My work involves ongoing research into historical and mythological narratives and ecological events that shape and change the world in unforeseeable ways. This unfolding exploration bleeds into my making, often in irrational ways. Through the use of a multitude of symbols and abstract narratives I investigate the possibility of a continuous shifting relationship to ourselves and our surroundings. I consider this perspective through the exploration of such tropes as technological devices, ritual, trance music, enigmatic sculptures, costumes, and metamorphic landscapes. These elements are seen in my multi-channel video's, soundscapes, and sculptural components of my ongoing installation work.

Bibliography

Aleksievich, Svetlana., and Gessen, Keith. *Voices from Chernobyl*. 1st ed. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005. Print.

Angelo, Joseph A. *Nuclear Technology*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Sourcebooks in Modern Technology.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter : A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. Print.

Borchard, Kurt. "Overlook: Exploring the Internal Fringes of America with the Center for Land Use Interpretation - Edited by Matthew Coolidge and Sarah Simons and Manufactured Landscapes - Directed by Jennifer Baichwal." *Sociological Inquiry* 79, no. 3 (2009): 376-80.

Chiweshe, Stella. *Stella Chweshe. Shungu*, 1997, Piranha Musik. Compact disc.

Falckenberg, Harald, ; Weibel, Peter. ; Thek, Paul. ; Zentrum Für Kunst Und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe. ; Sammlung Falckenberg. ; Museo Nacional Centro De Arte Reina Sofia. *Paul Thek : Artist's Artist*. ZKM/Center for Art and Media ; Sammlung Falckenberg Hamburg ; Museo Nacional Centro De Arte Reina Sofia ; MIT, 2008. Print.

"Ida Soulard- Heal the knife that cuts the wound", Vimeo video, 19:51. Posted by The Matter of Contradicion, May 30, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/67272673>.

Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Ex-cinema from a theory of experimental film and video*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. Print

Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Atomic light (shadow optics)*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. Print.

Matsumoto, Valerie J. ; Allmendinger, Blake. ; University of California, Los Angeles. Center for 17th- & 18th-Century Studies. ; William Andrews Clark Memorial Library. *Over the Edge Remapping the American West*. U of California, 1999. Print.

Merwin, W. S., and Poets Laureate Collection. *Migration : New & Selected Poems*. Port Townsend, Wash.: Copper Canyon Press, 2005. Print.

Meyers, Rita, *Directions/Questions*. In *Illuminating video: an essential guide to video art*. ed. Fifer, Sally Jo, and Doug Hall. New York, N.Y.: Aperture in association with the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990. Print.

Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.

Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects : Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Posthumanities ; 27. 2013.
Mycio, Mary. *Wormwood Forest : A Natural History of Chernobyl*. Washington, D.C.: Joseph Henry Press, 2005. Print.

“Plattform: Dark Ecology and Sonic Acts present “The Geologic Imagination”, Vimeo video, 47:56. Posted by Bergen Kunsthall, January 15, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/116963992>.

Rouget, G. *Music and trance : A theory of the relations between music and possession*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1985. Print.

Winterson, Jeanette. *Lighthousekeeping*. London: Fourth Estate, 2004. Print.

Velden, Lucas van der, Belina, Mirna, trans., *The Geologic Imagination- Sonic Acts*. Amsterdam, Netherlands, Sonic Acts Press. 2015.