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Art **Reviews**

Whose Mother Is Nature Anyway?

Contemporary society in the United States normalizes the idea of the exhausted mother, so why wouldn't mother nature be equally exhausted?



Annabel Keenan November 24, 2022

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Carolee Schneemann, *Secret Garden* (1956), oil on canvas (all photos by Annabel Keenan/Hyperallergic)

There's something almost intoxicating when an exhibition's message trickles down so profoundly into daily life. *I'm Not Your Mother*, a group show at PPOW, pokes holes in fundamental, seldom-questioned aspects of the history of western landscape painting, humanity's relationship with nature, and the experience of being a mother. Broad as that may seem, the show focuses in on the concept of mother nature and underscores the connection between the feminization and exploitation of the environment.

The romanticized idea of nature as the mother of all beings has roots in western landscape painting, a fact made clear by the show's inclusion of an 1877 work by the Hudson River School artist Jasper Francis Cropsey. The painting shows a fertile landscape encompassing a calm lake surrounded by luscious trees just starting to change color. An elevated bank bends into the lake, providing two figures with easy access to fish or contemplate nature's beauty. The work stands out amid the contemporary paintings and sculptures. Nearly all were made within the last few years, save for eerie, almost post-apocalyptic landscapes by Mira Schor from 1981 and 1982, more overtly apocalyptic photographs of destroyed medical buildings by LaToya Ruby Frazier from 2011, and the show's catalyst: "Secret Garden" a 1956 abstract landscape painting by Carolee Schneemann.



Jasper Francis Cropsey, "Head of the Lake" (1877), oil on canvas

Motherhood, like nature, is not an endless resource. They are, however, both renewable if given the chance to regenerate and restore. In a 2016 work by Schneemann that pairs a photograph of the artist feeding her beloved cat, La Niña, with text from a letter to her friend, fellow painter Ingrid Christie, she writes, “‘mother’ is deprived of self-definition ... her energies must go unquestioningly to sustain.” Schneemann goes on to say that male offspring and partners have “vampiric needs,” and rejects the domestic, maternal image of a woman, which she says is part of the “male lexicon.”

The phrase “vampiric needs” sticks out. Contemporary society in the United States normalizes the idea of the exhausted mother, so why wouldn’t mother nature be equally exhausted, depleted, sucked dry of resources as it tries to meet humankind’s demand? An image of care becomes one of plunder. Frazier’s photographs of hospital ruins, merging the destruction of the landscape with the trope of care — female or any such — again come to mind.

The idea of a woman as a passive resource proliferates in popular culture. In Robin F. Williams’s “Fearscape” (2022), a woman looks into the distance with an expression that seems to combine fear and discovery. The work is based on the “final girl” trope — a female character in horror films who is often the last survivor, witnessing the horrors as they unfold, sometimes uncovering them. Yet again, the woman serves as a resource and a means to an end.

Williams’s work could also reflect the viewer witnessing the atrocities of climate change and the sucking dry of both woman and land that unfolds within the show and across the globe. Perhaps Cropsey’s lush, idyllic landscape isn’t an outlier after all. All of the works on view represent something worth caring for, something that requires space to regenerate, and something that can lose the capacity to survive. The show reveals how feminizing nature exposes the environment to the same treatments that face women: exploitation, degradation, and plundering.

I’m Not Your Mother continues at PPOW gallery (390 Broadway, Tribeca, Manhattan) through December 3. The exhibition was curated by Eden Deering.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, "The Professional Building (Doctors' Offices)" (2011), gelatin silver print



Robin F. Williams, "Watch Yourself (Study)" (2022), pastel and colored pencil on paper