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# The Ceramic Body: Concepts of Violence, Nature, and Gender

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# **The Ceramic Body: Concepts of Violence, Nature, and Gender**

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## **Table of Contents**

Introduction	4
On the Woman-Nature Connection	5
The History of Ecofeminism and Ecofeminist Art	11
Criticisms of Western Ecofeminism	20
My Work	21
Conclusion	22
Works Cited	25



## **Introduction**

Who exactly is “Mother Nature”, and why is she female? One issue that is of debate among proponents of ecofeminism, a field of study that combines environmentalism and feminism, is the validity of the association between nature and women. It is commonly accepted by Western ecofeminists that women and nature share the experience of being viewed and treated as inferior to men and culture. Yet some proponents of the movement believe that the link between women and nature can be construed as positive and empowering, rather than belittling or oppressive.

My thesis project explores this topic by addressing the connections between women and nature, specifically the violence that has been inflicted upon them, both physical and institutional. I argue that engendering nature as female is problematic because of the associations we consequently make between the two, and the expectations that result from viewing them as such. Women are expected to be giving, nurturing, passive, and essentially mother-like, as opposed to ambitious, empowered, and active, as men are expected to be. As a result they are assigned roles that limit their ability and potential, and defying these roles can range from difficult to dangerous. The earth itself is often personified as "Mother Nature", which has its own set of harmful consequences. Both women and the environment have been viewed as commodities, resources taken for granted and exploited. By illustrating these links between the two, rather than perpetuating prominent stereotypes of a peaceful, happy, fertile "earth goddess," my work serves as a wake-up call to the injuries both parties are sustaining as a result of the current capitalistic hegemony and the institutions that support it.

## **On the Woman-Nature Connection**

To begin, it is necessary to define some terms that I will be using throughout this essay. I use the term "woman" in this essay in regard to its traditional definition of a human female, though as I will discuss in later chapters, the issue is not limited to a single expression of gender and sexuality. When I talk about "nature" as an entity, I define it as the natural world and everything it encompasses, exclusive of civilization and manmade structures. In opposition is the term "civilization", which I use to define everything human or manmade. Of course, the line between nature and non-nature is often blurred, after millennia of civilization's integration with and dependence upon nature.

The history of humankind's relationship to nature is extremely complex. Nature has been viewed and treated differently by societies throughout history, based on its use to a given civilization. When humans depended on the environment for their basic survival, nature was seen as a source of spiritual power (such as in shamanistic societies), or as a nurturing "Great Goddess" (such as in early agricultural communities) (Matilsky). Over the centuries, however, as humans gained control over their surroundings, we have donned an anthropocentric lens, viewing culture and nature as exclusive of and opposed to each other. Nature has been increasingly viewed by Western societies as inferior to humanity and its derivatives; in Christian societies, "man's divinely given dominion over the earth" as proclaimed by the Bible justified its exploitation (Matilsky 14). The adoption of Manifest Destiny that fueled the period of American expansion in the 19th century convinced the masses that the wilderness was something to be explored and conquered. Since the Industrial Revolution, relatively little has been done to

protect the earth's resources from exploitation by the wealthy and powerful. Nature has been transformed from a supernatural entity to the background for human development. All of these facades still exist in our cultural mindsets today. Yet the most ubiquitous representation of the natural world is the "Mother Nature" figure.

The first question when considering this phenomenon is how and why did this pervasive personification of nature become female, specifically a mother? Reproduction is what appears to connect women and nature in Western culture, as the very word “nature” derives meaning from the Latin root *nasci*, meaning "birth". Though both men and women play an obvious role in reproduction, women, specifically mothers, are the ones performing a literal "birthing". This association alone, however, is not enough to substantiate the link between women and nature: "the argument that women have a different relation to nature need not rest on...the appeal to a quality of empathy or mysterious power shared by all women and inherent in women's biology. Such differences may instead be seen as due to women's different social and historical position" (Plumwood, 35). The stance that women and nature are related because of their place in the hegemony is most widely discussed within the ecofeminism movement, so it is through this movement that I am interested in studying this apparent relationship. Most proponents of ecofeminism believe that "the oppression of women and the domination of Nature in patriarchal society is interconnected and mutually reinforcing" (Berman, 173). While there are many different subgroups of the ecofeminism movement, they are united by the overarching desire to liberate both women and nature while improving the human-nature relationship (Merchant 1995). Though there have been many different views within the movement on how to achieve this—distinctions that I will elaborate upon in a later chapter—this is the philosophy's main tenet.

There are many ways that the current power structure enables the subordination of women and nature; violence against them, both physical and implicit, is perpetuated particularly through linked language, hierarchical dichotomies, and gender roles. The language we use, which in modern Western societies has been predominantly constructed by men, reflects and maintains the power structures at work that devalue the worth of both women and nature (Berman). Terms that assign gendered or personified traits to nature often refer to the extent in which nature has been damaged or encroached upon by the human race. In her essay regarding the change in relationships between artists and the environment from ancient to modern times, Barbara Matilsky uses heavily loaded terms to describe the state of the environment before and after humankind's involvement. Even though Matilsky spends a short paragraph discussing "the close association between the earth and woman [sic] and the often violent abuses they both suffer", she still uses gendered and anthropomorphizing phrases to refer to the landscape. She is not the only one, as countless writers have described nature before contact with humans as "landscapes that appeared beyond man's control", "untouched by pioneers", and "pure and wholesome"; an undisturbed forest is commonly labeled as a "virgin forest" (Matilsky 12-32, Berman 177). Landscapes that have been altered are described as "denuded", "penetrated into", "ravaged", "violate[d] and "assault[ed]". These acts of transgression are described as a "conquest" (Matilsky, 12-32). These words, commonly used to describe women and the sexual violence used against them, set up a dichotomy of nature as either a virgin or a rape victim. This is especially troubling due to the fact that nature is voiceless and defenseless against the destruction dealt by humankind. It has no way to protect itself against encroaching industrialization, no way to say "no" to the loggers and miners that invade and desecrate. Personifying nature transforms it from a non-sentient phenomenon into a being that is capable of

response, but remains silent. An inherently passive entity becomes a willing victim, and then a piece of property: "The use of the terms 'virgin' and 'penetrate' in relation to wilderness areas perpetuates the notion of ownership and conquest—once you have penetrated her, she is yours" (Berman 177). Thus I propose that the violence women and the environment face are connected, as is the desire to control such bodies and their resources.

As the earth must endure the violences humankind wreaks against it, without much hope of reparation, Val Plumwood argues that the act of reproduction can be viewed as similarly passive and destructive to the body that endures its:

Because reproduction is construed not as a creative act, indeed not the act of an agent at all, it becomes something which is undergone not undertaken, at worst tortured and passive, at best a field for acceptance and resignation. When women's agency and choice are denied, the female body itself comes to be seen as oppressive... The construction of reproduction as the field of nature makes it the work of instinct, lacking skill, care and value. It is an unsharable and insupportable 'natural' burden which can be allowed to dominate and distort women's lives and destroy their capacity for choice and participation in a wider sphere of life.

(Plumwood 38)

Nature is seen as not only female, but as a "mother" to humankind. This is especially problematic when we think about the role mothers play in Western society: "Mother in patriarchal culture is she who provides all of our sustenance and who makes disappear all of our waste products, she who satisfies all of our wants and needs endlessly and without any cost to us" (Roach 49). The responsibilities hoisted upon mothers in particular are vast, yet the

definition of what a mother is remains narrow and rigid: “Mother is still used as a ‘vehicle for traditional ideology associating the role with maternal instinct, domesticity, reproduction, nurturing, morality, and self-sacrifice’” (Romberger and Scialdone-Kimberley 41). To be a mother is the ultimate form of selflessness, and therefore the best thing a woman can strive to be. She is supportive, giving, and nurturing; her job is to sacrifice and protect. She is patient, appeasing, accommodating, and forgiving. For a father to be these things is to go above and beyond the call of duty; men are praised excessively in the media for exhibiting the same qualities and performing the same activities that women do unnoticed on a daily basis. A mother is under-appreciated, but accepts her place as such, because that is her duty. When we view nature as such a figure, it justifies “our attitude that nature is a storehouse of riches which will never empty and which we may use at will for any purpose we desire, without incurring any debt or obligation of replacement” (Roach 49). If nature is our mother, we can expect to take everything from her and not be obligated to give anything in return. After all, she exists for us.

In many societies, this is the default expectation for a woman: that she will marry and raise children, giving up her identity as an independent individual in favor of acting as support for her offspring. Women are largely assumed to be “natural” caretakers, with the capacity and desire to fulfill the role of a mother above all else. Even though the birth rates are decreasing in many developed societies, as women gain access to education and other opportunities, there is still an underlying societal expectation that a woman should be supportive, nurturing, nonviolent, and passive, rather than having superior male qualities of assertion, individuality, intelligence, reason, and leadership.

When they do not conform to these stereotypes of acting docile, gentle, and yielding, women are viewed as wild, ferocious, uncontrollable, seductive, or dangerous. Similarly, when

the weather gets out of control or natural disasters occur, nature is depicted as being vindictive, punishing, and merciless. Breaches of conformity cause women and nature to be viewed as either violent or seductive, and this justifies their need to be tamed, subdued, conquered, and plundered. Domination comes hand-in-hand with otherization, which allows a group to be viewed and treated as less than human: "As long as we perceive women as closer to nature within a model which perceives nature to be on the one hand mechanical, on the other hand semi human, and in both cases legitimately exploitable, then we will see women as a resource, and both women and the environment will suffer" (Roach, 52). There are countless examples of women and the environment being taken advantage of and suffering for it; as Karen J. Warren states in her essay "Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters":

Cross-culturally, women are paid less than men, and women in most regions spend as much or more time working than men when unpaid housework is taken into account. Women everywhere control fewer resources and reap a lesser share of the world's wealth than men: Women do more than one-half of the world's work, but receive only 10 percent of the world's income and own only 1 percent of the world's property. (Warren 8)

Additionally, "it is estimated that women farmers grow at least half of the world's food" (9). Because women, particularly those that live in Third-World countries, are tasked with the collection of diminishing resources such as food, water, and fuelwood, they are disproportionately disadvantaged by environmental crises. This is one of the reasons why Warren argues that "nature is a feminist issue" (1). Economist Bina Agarwal would agree, as she states:

Because the domination of women and the domination of nature have occurred together, women have a particular stake in ending the domination of nature... The feminist movement and the environmental movement both stand for egalitarian, nonhierarchical systems. They thus have a good deal in common and need to work together to evolve a common perspective, theory, and practice. (Agarwal)

Several ecofeminist writers propose that the root of this inequality lies in the existence of a dichotomy between nature and civilization, or culture. Because "culture" is "minimally defined as the transcendence, by means of systems of thought and technology, of the natural givens of existence", it is positioned not only in opposition to nature, but as "transcending" nature, and therefore above it (Ortner 84). Culture and reason, which are associated with masculinity, are viewed as superior to nature and emotion, which is associated with femininity (Plumwood 20). Many ecofeminist writers, including Plumwood, have come to the conclusion that in order to do away with inequality, we must do away with these dichotomies, which inherently create hierarchies. Separating ourselves from nature at best increases our indifference and apathy towards it; at worst, it encourages disdainful or antagonistic views of the natural sphere, and ultimately, of women (Plumwood).

### **The History of Ecofeminism and Ecofeminist Art**

Springing from the feminist and environmental movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, ecofeminism is "a theory and movement for social change that combines ecological principles with feminist theory" (Berman, 173). The term was coined by French feminist Franciose d'Eaubonne in her book, *Le Feminisme Ou La Mort* (1974), and most of the related art and writing emerged in the 80s and 90s. Though the environmental art movement was going



strong at this point, the most visible leaders of the movement were men. Land art, also known as Earth art, gained popularity in the 60s and 70s and was led by male American artists such as Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria, and Michael Heizer. The earthworks produced by these artists tended to be large-scale and intervened with or transformed the landscape somehow, usually by digging into or moving the earth itself. Heizer's 1970 work "Double Negative" consists of a manmade 30' x 50' x 1500' trench cut into the earth, which displaced 244,000 tons of rock. Two of Walter De Maria's best-known works, *The Lightning Field* (1977) and *Vertical Earth Kilometer* (1977) consisted of brass rods drilled into the ground, the latter running a full kilometer into the earth. These literal penetrations of the earth were among the first and most popular works to be based upon the environment; but rather than respecting or celebrating it, male artists used the landscape as a background to make their own marks.

Women who wanted to work within the realm of environmental art found little space to do so: "Patronage for women in environmental art was also a problem, considering the 'debut' environmental art exhibition, *Earth Works*, 1968, solely exhibited men, and the Dwan Gallery, responsible for hold [sic] the pioneering exhibition, occasionally exhibited women in group exhibitions but never exhibited a solo show of a woman artist" (Wildly, 54). Thus, female artists took it upon themselves to bring about an "ecological revolution" (Glazebrook, 12). Whereas male artists' works were primarily displays of masculine strength and phallic symbolism, female artists such as Ana Mendiata, Agnes Denes, Patricia Johanson, and Jackie Brookner took to planting and revitalizing the earth, and confronting the structures that dismissed nature or allowed for its destruction.

The earliest form of ecofeminism is referred to as "cultural ecofeminism". Artists primarily involved ritual, mythology, and the worship of the "earth goddess" as a way to relate to

nature. They acknowledged that women were indeed closer to nature than men, but that this connection could be a source of empowerment, rather than oppression. Merchant describes this belief and its expression:

Cultural ecofeminism celebrates the relationship between women and nature through the revival of ancient rituals centered on goddess worship, the moon, animals, and the female reproductive system. A vision in which nature is held in esteem as mother and goddess is a source of inspiration and empowerment for many ecofeminists. Spirituality is seen as a source of both personal and social change. Goddess worship and rituals centered around the lunar and female menstrual cycles, lectures, concerts, art exhibitions, street and theater productions, and direct political action...are all examples of the re-visioning of nature and women as powerful forces. Cultural ecofeminist philosophy embraces intuition, an ethic of caring, and web-like human-nature relationships. (Merchant 1995, 315-316)

Examples of work that fit within this sub-movement include Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas Series* (1973-1980), Jill Orr's *Bleeding Trees* (1979), and Mary Beth Edelson *Goddess Head* (1975). Heavily focused on ritual and/or the body, these works bring attention to nature and woman's cosmic relationship to it. Mendieta was one of the first artists to combine the emerging practices of land art, body art, and performance; her *Siluetas Series* is a series of photographs



13 Ana Mendieta, *Untitled* (Silueta Series, Mexico), 1976, 20" x 13", color slide

depicting the female body through imprints in nature. Graphic and moving, they make use of the earth and other materials, such as blood and fire, to illustrate woman's changing role and relationship with nature and the "Great Goddess" (Jacob). Orr's photographic performance series *Bleeding Trees* is even more grotesque, as she contorts her naked body in painful-looking poses in order to appeal to the viewers' empathy and bring attention to "the natural and unnatural life cycle of trees" (Orr). Mary Beth Edelson is another artist known for her photographs of emotive female figures, usually nude, which she alters by drawing or collaging. She says of her popular print *Goddess Head*: "The spiraling Goddess Head is an expanded sacred image of women that proclaims the universality of Her protective, regenerative powers, and the recognition of Goddess in action" (Edelson). Ariel Salleh posits that the shared experience of oppression that fosters this bond between women and nature can engender positive effects: "[women] are disadvantaged in the formal economic system, yet empowered by alternative knowledges and skills" (Salleh 213). By celebrating the female body, these artists hoped to bring attention to and



Jill Orr, *Bleeding Trees*, 1979, performance and color photograph



Mary Beth Edelson, *Goddess Head*, 1975, various sizes, collage, Montuak Beach, Long Island

glorify the female experience.

However, as Catherine Roach discusses in her essay *Loving Your Mother: On the Woman-Nature Relation*, this viewpoint is problematic in that it universalizes "womanhood", excluding women who do not fit into the experience, such as those who choose not to or cannot reproduce or whose identity lies outside of the gender binary. She also criticizes the terms "Mother Nature" and "Earth Mother", which are also popular with cultural ecofeminism in regard to goddess worship. The idea that nature is a female, motherly figure "who satisfies all of our wants and needs endlessly and without any cost to us" is incredibly anthropocentric and harmful, considering our rapacious history in regard to the earth's natural resources (Roach 49). Additionally, Roach questions the resulting "hierarchical dualism of women as relatively 'good' (closer to nature) and men as relatively 'bad' (farther from nature)" that is established after attempts to rank sexes in answer to a "conceptually flawed question" (54, 53). She believes that humans are all equal in terms of "naturalness", and that attempting to distance oneself from nature only allows one to distance themselves from the destruction being wreaked upon it.

In the 1980s, artists moved away from female iconography in favor of making remedial earth art, focusing on restoring habitats and ecosystems. This new focus, sometimes categorized as liberal ecofeminism, aimed to heal damaged ecosystems and reform human relations with nature through government laws, such as the regulation of environmental pollutants (Merchant 1995 315). By paying more attention to the ecology aspects of ecofeminism, rather than the feminist ones, women hoped to "transcend the social stigma of their biology and join men in the cultural project of environmental conversation" (315). This period gave rise to many ambitious and long-lasting projects, such as Agnes Denes *Wheatfield: A Confrontation* (1982) and Patricia Johanson's *Fair Park Lagoon* (1981-1986). In May of 1982, Denes succeeded in planting 2 acres

of wheat over a landfill in lower Manhattan, which was then harvested in August. Positioned between Wall Street, the World Trade Center, and the Statue of Liberty, this reclamation of urban space "worth \$4.5 billion created a powerful paradox" (Denes). The



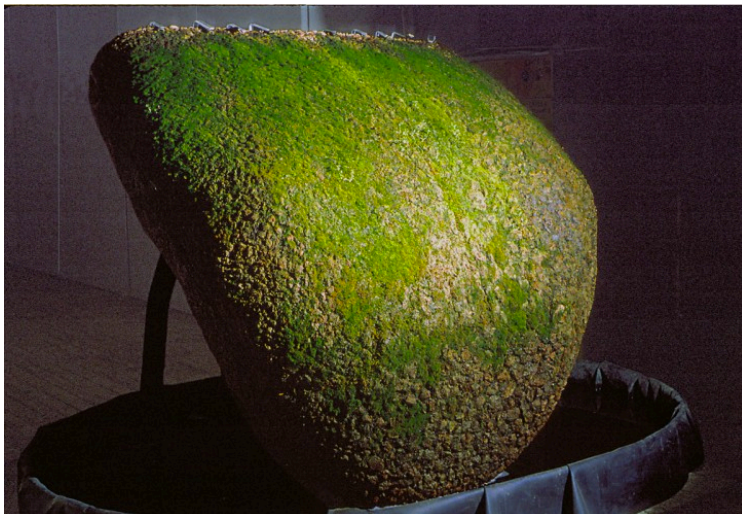
Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*, 1982, Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan

1000 pounds of wheat produced, then distributed and planted around the world, spoke to the "mismanagement, waste, world hunger and ecological concerns" created by capitalism. Johanson took a more local approach when she tackled an environmentally degrading and physically dangerous lagoon in Dallas, Texas and completely renovated it into a safe, clean, and environmentally thriving park that caused a surge in plant and animal life, as well as human interaction. *Fair Park Lagoon* proved that communities can be improved when the relationship between nature and humans is given attention and care.

As the decade progressed, the ecofeminism movement leaned back towards encompassing both liberal and cultural movements, embracing the feminine while attempting to proactively heal the environment. This gave rise to social ecofeminism, which is sometimes combined with socialist ecofeminism. It aimed to restructure the human-nature relationship altogether, acknowledging that industrial capitalism "precludes sustainability" and ignores the needs of the environment while taking advantage of its resources (Merchant 1995, 320). Socialist ecofeminism critiques how women and nature are both treated when economic greed is mistaken as need. In this viewpoint, nature and humans are viewed as separate but equal, and the



gendering or personification of nature is avoided. While technological and infrastructure development is acknowledged as necessary to growth under certain circumstances, it should be in partnership with ecology, and should not take precedence over it. Jackie Brookner's *Prima Lingua* is a sculpture of a giant tongue that also functions as a self-cleaning fountain that supports a self-sustaining ecosystem of plants, fish, and snails. With its intimate iconography of the human body, as well as its remedial function, Brookner's biosculpture "visibly transforms what is degraded, revealing the creativity of detritus, showing that decay is part of creation " (Brookner). Her work showed that art could be referential to ritual and the body while serving a direct ecological purpose.



Jackie Brookner, *Prima Lingua*,  
1996-Present, 64" x 101" x 80"  
Concrete, volcanic rock,  
mosses, ferns, wetland plants,  
fish, steel



Today, ecofeminism as a movement cannot be easily identified within the contemporary art world. While environmental and feminist art does overlap, few contemporary artists label themselves as ecofeminist. Yet many artists continue to work with the relationship between nature and the female body. Among these artists are Kate MacDowell and Arthur Gonzalez, whose figurative ceramics indirectly inspired my own work. Kate MacDowell addresses the theme of violence against the environment through mythology in her porcelain sculpture *Daphne* (2007). Modeled off of Bernini's marble sculpture, the piece "is transformed by one additional



Kate MacDowell,  
*Daphne*, 2007,  
53"x17"x40", hand  
built porcelain

step from woman to tree to clear-cut slash pile. The nymph's distress now reflects a different kind of 'rape'". The piece uses the analogy of the body as nature to appeal to the viewer's empathy, and "to think about what is lost from environmental degradation, what sensory delights of texture and form are removed as we allow part of our body to be cut away" (MacDowell). MacDowell brings attention not only to the damage done to the literal and figurative bodies involved, but also to the overarching aesthetics that nature brings to the world.

Unlike MacDowell's pristine surfaces and delicate forms, Arthur Gonzalez's ceramic and mixed media series "A Question of Balance" (2002-2012) is made up of rough forms and eclectic materials, and is equal parts figurative and abstract. The series, like his others, is a narrative, though the story is obscured through the viewer's lens of experience. The characters featured are all young girls, yet each one has a certain unique energy and power, derived from their poses, expressions, and the objects that accompany them. Tied to the natural, the artificial, and the surreal, Gonzalez's work demonstrates the vast potential of the female body as an art subject besides its popular use as a sexual object.



Arthur Gonzalez, *Hobbled*, 2007, ceramic, horse hair, natural sponge, glass, iron rod, rubber hose, candles, fire, 50"x38"x19"



## Criticisms of Western Ecofeminism

Criticisms of ecofeminism in its original, Western-centric form include the fact that it tends to assume the universality of Western culture—that all societies use the same language and comparisons, that all “women” fall under the same category, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, etc. It assumes that these specific dualities are “a feature of human thought or culture”, when they are “specifically a feature of *western* thought” (Plumwood 11, italics original). While this association may play an important role in the West, it does not make up the entirety of the oppression women face throughout the world; as Bina Agarwal stated, the “nature-culture divide is not universal across all cultures, nor is there uniformity in the meaning attributed to ‘nature,’ ‘culture,’ ‘male,’ and ‘female’” (Agarwal).

Additionally, the implications of the association between nature and certain subgroups of humans reach beyond just the traditional gender duality initially brought up in the movement’s beginnings. Recently, there has been a larger focus on how race and class pertains to this discussion. Women, particularly those in Third World countries, are disproportionately affected by capitalist development and environmental degradation. Groups that do not fit the “unmarked” “master identity” of white maleness are also more closely associated with nature, due to the “dualistic Enlightenment view of nature, the body, and animality as inferior to reason” that has been established by white male theorists, psychologists, and historians (Twine 33, 34). Animalizing peoples of certain racial and ethnic minorities has been a popular means of and justification for their marking and dehumanization (46). Twine goes on to say in his essay *Ma(r)king Essence-Ecofeminism and Embodiment* that the assignment of value to a person based on their “usefulness” to the Western capitalist economy results in “a socio-economic *uselessness* perceived amongst colonized peoples”, and that this applies to the elderly and disabled as well

(42, italics original). In short, the oppression that accompanies being associated with nature is not only limited to non-men, but is a relevant and systematic method used against all minorities.

## **My Work**

My work this semester is an exploration of the relationship between women and nature, specifically the violence they face at the hands of mankind. As I have discussed, there are many different ways that this violence takes form.

For my thesis project, I have built a female figure out of clay, which I then injured and disfigured by attacking it with tools as well as my own hands. The figure stands to represent the different forms of violence both women and the environment have endured throughout history at the hands of mankind. I chose to build a life-size female figure out of clay, a material that is sourced directly from the earth. The figure is injured and down on one knee, but struggling to stand. The surface of the sculpture is imprinted by a bark mold I have made from trees on campus. A tree stump supports the figure and intertwines outward from her spine into the rest of her body, to remind us that nature is the backbone of civilization, and that we could not survive without it. Fragments of branches, leaves, and plant stems are embedded in the clay. Injured and disfigured, her wounds code sexual and industrial-related violence, suffered at the "hands" of mankind. This refers in part to actual violence inflicted upon women, and in part to the language used to describe areas of the environment that have been damaged or "tainted" by man. The clay that I have scraped away is littered upon the dirt surrounding the figure, accompanied by the tools used to wound her: shovels, representing the industrial; a gardening rake and hoe, representing the agricultural; and eating utensils, representing the food women are expected produce for others, on a domestic and worldwide scale. Handprints are visible on her neck, arms,

legs, breasts, and face, representing physical and sexual violence. My work aims to be brutal, not beautiful; as Agnes Denes says, “If art, it should not be benign, it should be malignant...Art should be above [beauty and usefulness], it should nauseate, disturb, arouse” (Denes). I want the viewer to acknowledge the destruction the figure has faced, and realize that it is not only deplorable, but also preventable.

Firing a ceramic work is an irreversible act—clay, once fired, will exist in the same state for many thousands of years, potentially forever. Firing this piece would make her injuries permanent - she would be forever hollowed out, scratched, and violated, until I chose to shatter her even further, reducing her body to rubble. Since this is not my hope for this issue—I believe that the damage that has been done to women and the environment can be redressed—instead of firing the piece at the end of the show, I plan to reduce the remnants of the piece, which include clay, dirt, and other natural elements, back to their original formless state. From there the materials may be then used to create something new.

## **Conclusion**

Although the female figure I have created reflects the oppression of women and the violence enacted against them, uncritically gendering nature as “female” is problematic because of the associations we typically make between the two, and the expectations and values we assign to them based on this association. Nature is historically viewed as inferior to civilization, and women as inferior to men: they are supposedly giving, nurturing, and passive, as opposed to taking, empowered, and active. Some ecofeminists are interested in reclaiming these associations, and by doing so, empowering women, especially those who feel a special "connection" to nature based on concepts of fertility and reproductive cycles.

I reject this form of feminism in which goddess-worship is utilized as a tool to disarm harmful stereotypes because it excludes large groups of women, such as those who cannot or choose not to reproduce. Additionally, stereotyping women and nature as “life-giving” and “nurturing” perpetuates the idea that it is their duty to create resources and provide services for others, and normalizes the exploitation of these resources. Glorifying women and nature for their outer beauty or feminine peacefulness normalizes the idea that women are passive, supportive, and weaker than men, while negating their ability to feel and express negative emotions. Viewing nature and women as similarly “seductive” and “uncontrollable” wrongly justifies the conquest and exertion of control over them by mankind. While the assumption that women are inherently more “connected” to nature is harmful and perpetuates these stereotypes, there is truth in that what women, and in fact all oppressed groups (based on race, sexuality, class, ability, etc), share with nature is the common history of subordination and inflicted violence by the hegemony. By depicting the reality of the link between women and nature rather than the stereotype, my work brings attention to the damage that has been done and that will be perpetuated should the problem not be recognized and addressed at both cultural and institutional levels. I do not claim to have the answers, but in order to fix the problem, we must first acknowledge that it exists.



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