

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Land Akin

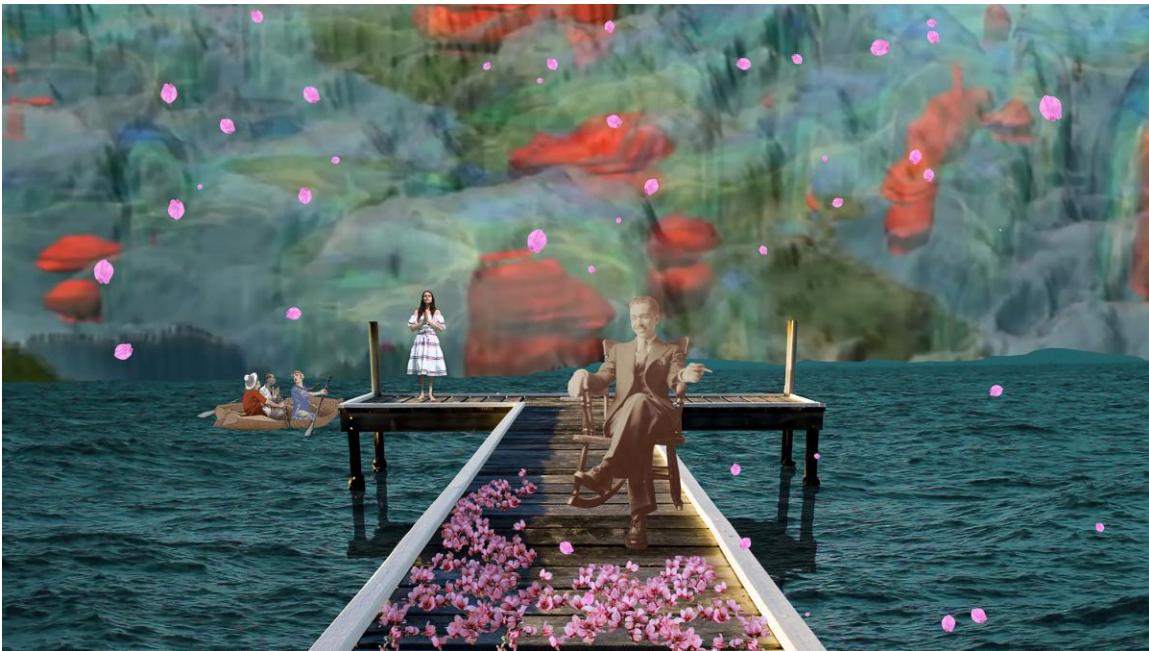
Curated by Gabriel de Guzman

January 9–February 21, 2021

Exhibition First Day: Saturday, January 9, timed entry required, check
www.smackmellon.org for more information

Media contact Audrey Irving: airving@smackmellon.org

Tatiana Arocha, Kevin Quiles Bonilla, Esteban Cabeza de Baca, Rachelle Dang, Athena LaTocha, Jodie Lyn-Kee-Chow, Allison Maria Rodriguez, Christine Howard Sandoval, and Kiyon Williams



Allison Maria Rodriguez, *In the Presence of Absence – José María & Ike* (video still), 2017–21, multichannel video installation, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Land Akin features BIPOC artists who are making work through embodied practices that convey cultural ways of knowing by engaging deep connections with land and place. Their work challenges us to reenvision our relationship to the land from a decolonial perspective. In this exhibition, kinship operates as a joining dynamic that aligns decolonial views of race and ecology, attempting to subvert the western capitalist mentality of land as property to be owned, conquered, or exploited for its natural resources. Instead, *Land Akin* advocates for a reimagining of the land as family or ancestry, to be respected and treated with reverence. Learning to foster our relationship with the natural world is a strategy for developing kinship among ourselves as people who share the earth, and ultimately, for recognizing that we are all part of nature. Contending with the generational trauma of colonialism, the artists in this exhibition employ hybrid artistic modes that emerge from the tactics of resilience and adaptation often mirrored in the impacted landscapes they are from. Their work shares an

S m a c k M e l l o n

investment in remaking a vision of ecological, Black, Brown, and Indigenous futures, where fragmented and intersectional modes of cultural knowledge can be rebuilt, embodied, and revived.

Seeing land as imbued with sacredness, several artists are using soil and mud as materials in their work as a vehicle for communing with past ancestors of a site. **Athena LaTocha** creates massive drawings using earth-toned inks and natural materials, like mud and moss. Reflecting on her deep investigations into the land, the artist immerses



Athena LaTocha, *Bulbancha (Green Silence)*, 2019, Ink, Spanish moss, earth on paper, 132" x 206". Courtesy of the artist.

herself in the work to convey a sense of traversing the landscape. This monumental work suggests the vastness and inherent force of nature while calling attention to the besieged environmental terrain.

Christine Howard Sandoval's work is part of a larger project titled *Channel*, which investigates various homonymic meanings of the word, such as the bed of a waterway, a medium for communicating with

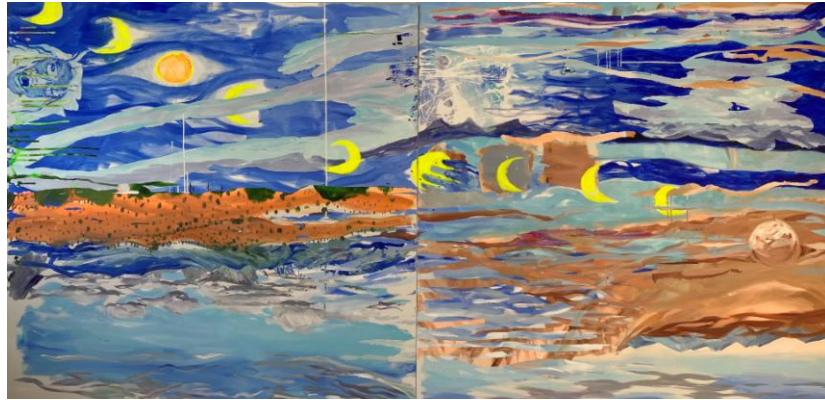
spirits, and a band of frequency used for telecommunication. In this work, the artist considers her own embedded relations to water, land, and scarcity. **Kiyan Williams** uncovers the exploitation of Black people in the U.S., exploring marginalized identities and ecology through Black, transgender, and transgressive subjectivities. Working fluidly in sculpture, video, and performance, they use soil to embody sites of historical trauma, while tracing the origins of our current environmental crisis to the profiteering of settler-colonists who exploited land, natural resources, and the labor of enslaved Africans.

Several artists are grappling with the colonial history of the Caribbean in their work. **Kevin Quiles Bonilla**'s photographs can be considered a form of performance documentation. In these images, he engages with a blue tarp, a symbol of the aftermath of Hurricane María, which ravaged Bonilla's homeland of Puerto Rico in 2017. As a colony of the United States, Puerto Rico received grossly insufficient aid and financial relief from the federal government, which distributed these tarps as a temporary fix to people whose homes had been damaged. Bonilla shrouds his body with the tattered woven covering, which serves as inadequate protection from destructive forces. Merging two overarching concerns in her work, Latinx identity and environmental conservation, Cuban American artist **Allison Maria Rodriguez**'s multi-media installation explores the intimate, yet collective, experience of ecological and cultural loss that persists in our contemporary reality. In this work, personal memories and fantastical landscapes converge in an effort to conjure a new space for culture and nature to coexist. Jamaican born artist **Jodie Lyn-Kee-Chow** will present a performance on February 20th, which draws on her mixed Afro-Caribbean and Chinese heritage, embodying a healer

character who offers herbal remedies for ailments that block our experience of the natural world.

Recollections of family and ancestral homelands inform the work of many of the artists in this exhibition. **Tatiana Arocha** combines handmade and digital processes to create monumental images of lush greenery from the jungles of her native Colombia. Her works reference the local flora and fauna, shedding light on this landscape through familial, environmental, spiritual, and postcolonial concerns.

Esteban Cabeza de Baca reemploys the Western tradition of plein air landscape painting to subvert colonial abuses. Here Cabeza de Baca, who



Esteban Cabeza de Baca, *Ohkay Owingeh*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 5' x 10'. Courtesy of Garth Greenan Gallery.

grew up in southern California in a town along the U.S.-Mexico border, contemplates the propagation of plants and the earth's future, as he recalls how his grandmother and other family members would bring seeds across the border for planting. **Rachelle Dang's** sculptural work in *Land Akin* was inspired by the eminent African American scholar, author, and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois, paying homage to kinship across continents, islands, and oceans. Dang's research-based approach led her to a 1937 article that Du Bois devoted to Hawaii, the place where Dang was born and raised. The artist interprets Du Bois's text as a cry to reconceptualize nature as integral to anticolonial critique, to oppose dominant Western hierarchical views of nature and subjugated populations as knowable and exploitable.

While the artworks in *Land Akin* present imagery that can be both expressive and illustrative, visceral and contemplative, representational and conceptual, and varying shades of those qualities, they are all rooted in a sense of place and of responsibility. Although the artists are reflecting on the past, they do so in order to learn how marginalized peoples can find a path forward. The exhibition and programs call on us to reevaluate how we live with nature, acknowledging historical atrocities while envisioning a decolonized, ecologically sustainable future, where we see landscape as not merely a backdrop, but as a protagonist in our lives.

We acknowledge the traditional, ancestral, unceded homelands of the Lenape, the Munsee, the Manahatin, the Canarsie, the Matinecock, the Shinnecock, and other Indigenous nations. We respect that many Indigenous people continue to live and work on this land and recognize their ongoing contributions to this area.

PROGRAMS

EXHIBITION TOUR

Sunday, January 17, 3–4:30 PM

Exhibition curator **Gabriel de Guzman**, Smack Mellon's Curator & Director of Exhibitions, will lead a tour of *Land Akin*, along with exhibition artists **Rachelle Dang** and **Athena LaTocha**.

PERFORMANCE

Saturday, January 23, 5–6 PM

In the performance piece *Presidential Alert (America, Lip-Sync for Your Life)*, **Kevin**



Kevin Quiles Bonilla, *Presidential Alert (America, Lip-Sync for Your Life)*, 2019, performance still. Courtesy of the artist.

Quiles Bonilla explores the act of lip-syncing as a strategy of embodiment and unearthing through multiple temporalities. For context, he uses the song "America" from the 1961 film version of the musical *West Side Story*, which is interrupted by multiple voices from the recent past, such as former president Trump speaking about the aftermath of Hurricane María in Puerto Rico in 2017, Young Lords member Pedro Pietri reciting his

poem "Puerto Rican Obituary" in 1969, and Hawaiian activist Haunani-Kay Trask speaking on stolen lands in 1990.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

Thursday, January 28, 6:30–8 PM and

Thursday, February 4, 6:30–8 PM

In these roundtable discussions, join exhibiting artist **Tatiana Arocha** in her tea salon project, titled *Impending Beauty*. During these horizontal conversations, guest speakers, other exhibiting artists, and participants—both virtual and in-person—are invited to discuss topics that explore culture and sustainability.

The first discussion on **January 28th** centers on the topic of food production and sustainability, and will feature guests **Jungwon Kim** of Rainforest Alliance and **Ceci Pineda** of BK ROT.

The second conversation on **February 4th** will focus on sustainable fashion and the impact on the land. This talk will feature **Céline Semaan**, designer, advocate, writer, and founder of Slow



Tatiana Arocha, *Impending Beauty*, 2019, vintage settee and armchairs, upholstered with digital prints on cotton, hand-painted with acrylic, and hand-decorated porcelain with decals and gold paint. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Walker Esner.

S m a c k M e l l o n

Factory and The Library Study Hall, and **Angel Chang**, sustainable women's wear designer.

PERFORMANCE

Saturday, February 20, 5–6 PM

In the performance *JunkanooHakkaMama*, created by **Jodie Lyn-Kee-Chow**, the artist and five other performers will engage in a ritualistic representation of the five senses. Drawing from her Jamaican background, and from her Afro-Caribbean and Chinese heritage, Lyn-Kee-Chow embodies the character of a healer who uses herbal remedies and other curative elements, attempting to overcome the trauma of colonial exploitation in order to reconnect the body with nature.

This exhibition is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, New York City Council Member Stephen Levin, and the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature, and with generous support from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Lily Auchincloss Foundation, Robert Lehman Foundation, Select Equity Group Foundation, many individuals and Smack Mellon's Members.

Smack Mellon's programs are also made possible with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and with generous support from The Edward and Sally Van Lier Fund of The New York Community Trust, Jerome Foundation, The Roy and Niuta Titus Foundation, Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation Inc., and Exploring The Arts. In-kind donations are provided by Materials for the Arts, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs/NYC Department of Sanitation/NYC Department of Education.

Smack Mellon would like to extend a special thanks to all of the individuals, foundations, and businesses who have contributed to the NYC COVID-19 Response & Impact Fund.

Space for Smack Mellon's programs is generously provided by the Walentas family and Two Trees Management.

Media contact Audrey Irving: airving@smackmellon.org