

Art **Reviews**

Two Sparse Brooklyn Exhibitions Probe the Elemental Forces of Life

Things have their own power and agency in the artist's installation and humans are part of a complex world of life forms and materials.



by Gregory Volk
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Installation view of *Luba Drozd: The Tenacity of a Fluid Trace* at Smack Mellon. Site-specific sound and animation installation, dimensions variable (courtesy Smack Mellon, photo Etienne Frossard)

Two impressive shows inaugurate Smack Mellon's innovative *Close Reading* exhibition series, spotlighting "under-recognized, early to mid-career artist," accompanied by a related group exhibition.

Sound artist Luba Drozd is the first feature artist. Her expansive installation in Gallery One, largely made of bare-bones construction materials that emit complex, fluctuating sound, is also her first large-scale solo show in New York, her adopted city.

Drozd's installation has the enigmatic title *The Tenacity of a Fluid Trace*, from Italian Francesco Serao's 1743 book on the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, purportedly the first sustained written account of a volcanic eruption, in which the author coined the term "lava." While not "about" volcanoes, the installation involves a thoughtful, deeply felt, refreshingly non-anthropocentric engagement with and openness to organic and synthetic matter, natural phenomena, architecture, and the environment.



Installation view of *Luba Drozd: The Tenacity of a Fluid Trace* at Smack Mellon. Site-specific sound and animation installation, dimensions variable (photo Gregory Volk/Hyperallergic)

The space initially appears to be under construction. Upright sheets of white drywall balance next to concrete pillars; a section of sheet metal leans against another pillar, near a low stack of steel beams. A stack of industrial materials, with alternating layers of sheet metal and steel beams, is in front of another piece of drywall. A single piece of sheet metal forms an arc that just barely touches a wall.

Drozd's materials suit the building, formerly a boiler house, and the industrial neighborhood. Rapid gentrification has resulted in rampant construction outside; piles of building materials abound. It's as if some of this activity has spilled into the gallery to take on new forms and meanings. Yet these seemingly offhand configurations of drywall, steel beams, sheet metal, and piano wire are actually ultra-precise sculptures, in sensitive dialogue with the very specific architectural setting, including extant structures (walls, windows, columns, ceiling) and changing phenomena (sunlight, shadows).

Each configuration is also a kind of musical instrument, tuned to a specific frequency. Piano wires are fastened to the sculptures, and to parts of the building; tiny motors make them vibrate. As they do, the sculptures resonate without loudspeakers; one hears the materials themselves. The varied tones swell and subside, travel and merge throughout the room, forming an immersive sonic environment. Sometimes droning, other times shrill and insistent, these sounds are heard but also felt in the body. Some are barely audible. This is all extraordinarily effective. These workaday materials look surprisingly eventful; I wouldn't have thought that such basic things could be so visually and sonically compelling.



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Three discreet projectors direct beams of light onto surfaces, and cast mobile shadows on the walls. This slowly shifting light combines with sunlight entering through large windows; inside and outside, architecture and world (and even cosmos), subtly converge. Three installed mimosa pudica plants heighten the sensitivity that characterizes the whole installation. These plants respond to touch, folding inward, and to darkness and light. I spent an hour or so in the installation, at times with my eyes closed to better absorb the sounds, engrossed in the environment.

The exhibition comes at an especially fraught time, with Vladimir Putin's vicious, genocidal war on Ukraine, which affects Drozd deeply, as recounted [here](#). The artist was born in Lviv, Ukraine, and immigrated to the United States as a teenager. Russian missile, bomb, artillery, and shell attacks that have killed thousands already have destroyed homes, schools, hospitals, and playgrounds, strewing cities with metal shards, demolished walls, and other debris.

I would hardly characterize Drozd's installation as a direct response to the war, yet correspondences are

evident, especially in her deep feeling and respect for matter, in contrast with Putin’s senseless destruction. Things have their own power and agency in the artist’s installation — simple drywall commands attention; metal resonates; steel beams “speak” — and humans are part of a complex world of life forms and materials, not its self-appointed (and horrific, in Putin’s case) masters.



Installation view of *Luba Drozd: The Tenacity of a Fluid Trace* at Smack Mellon. Site-specific sound and animation installation, dimensions variable (courtesy Smack Mellon, photo Etienne Frossard)

This empathic engagement with matter is also apparent in the exhibition in Gallery Two’s group show, *The Dissolution caus’d by Fire is in all Bodies*, also titled after Francesco Sereno’s book. Drozd, along with Smack Mellon’s Curator and Director of Exhibitions Rachel Vera Steinberg, chose the artists and artworks.

Sound from Charisse Pearlina Weston’s video projection fills the space. The video shows two dried, brown palm fronds (perhaps with religious significance) touching and rubbing one another (“A Case. A Vessel. A Fruit. For Touching,” 2016/2022). Gradually, the scratching of the fronds mixes with urban sounds the artist recorded in her native Houston; the fronds continue their fascinating dance while the sound grows ever louder, more layered, and urgent.

On the floor are scattered, mostly silver, really small mixed media sculptures by Mimi Park (“Particle From Ignition, Earthling,” 2022). Her bewitching works, composed with great care, are strikingly ambiguous. Little balls suggest distant planets. An upright, spindly sculpture resembles an admixture of a twiggy plant and a striding human. Others, including solar-powered, kinetic works (although I didn’t detect movement), conflate microscopic forms, cosmic bodies, and abstract shapes. The layout “mirrors,” according to the label, the “celestial constellation” overhead during the installation period; in her abstract way, Park brings the physical heavens into the space.

Three very different soundtracks, from three composers (all well worth sampling), figure prominently in Leah Beeferman's video of an arctic lake in northern Finland. Beeferman's views of the lake and its environs in changing light, recorded hourly on a June day, when the sun never sets, are mesmerizing. As with Drozd's installation, and as with the lava in Serao's book, the artist presents non-human things — water, sky, sunlight, mountains, snow, and sound — as vital, elemental forces.



Installation view of *The Dissolution caus'd by Fire is in all Bodies* at Smack Mellon. Floor: Mimi Park, "Particle From Ignition, Earthling" (2022), found objects, electronic components, ceramics, metal wire, solder, dimensions variable (courtesy the artist); walls left to right: Charisse Pearlina Weston, "The Unpossessed" (2016), chapbook, unique edition, 8.5 x 5.5 x .25 inches, "A Case. A Vessel. A Fruit. For Touching" (2016/2022), video projection (image courtesy Smack Mellon, photo Etienne Frossard)



Leah Beeferman, "Shades of Lake" (2019–21), video (courtesy the artist)

Luba Drozd: The Tenacity of a Fluid Trace and The Dissolution caus'd by Fire is in all Bodies *continue*

at Smack Mellon (92 Plymouth Street, Dumbo, Brooklyn) through November 6. The Tenacity of a Fluid Trace was curated by Rachel Vera Steinberg. The Dissolution caus'd by Fire is in all Bodies was curated by Rachel Vera Steinberg and Luba Drozd.

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