

Art Reviews

Who Owns the Earth?

This group show proposes fresh paradigms of land ownership and art making in contrast to the rugged individualism of much early Land Art.



Louis Bury September 8, 2021

There's a curious paradox in the title of Unison Arts's *Owning Earth*, a seemingly straightforward group exhibition about our species' complex attitudes toward land. Curator Tal Beery and assistant curator Erin Lee Antonak clearly intend the exhibition to question anthropocentric ideologies of mastery and domination over the earth. Yet the title speaks of the earth as being owned. This paradox, it turns out, is not a misnomer. Instead, many of the exhibition's 18 artworks, by 24 artists, incorporate the visual language of property relations as a way to propose alternatives to the norms of ownership.

This dynamic manifests most pointedly in Eliza Evans's ingenious piece of artistic activism, "All the Way To Hell" (2020–ongoing). The artist has divided a three-acre Oklahoma property she owns into a thousand 6-by-18-foot parcels. Each parcel's mineral rights — which extend, under United States property law, to the center of the earth — are being sold or given away to a thousand individuals, creating a bureaucratic morass for the fossil fuel companies interested in acquiring the land for fracking. When Evans has displayed the work in a gallery setting, the visual focus has been on core samples and property deeds; installed along Unison's wooded trails, the focus shifts to a plot of land demarcated in the manner of a grave site, equivalent in size to one Oklahoman parcel.





Eileen Wold, "Square Meter" (2021), recycled aluminum post

Numerous other works in *Owning Earth* also play with the aesthetics of territorialism. Affixed atop a dead cedar trunk in a clearing, Brooke Singer's striped "Site Profile Flag #4" (2021) takes its dusty, earth-toned coloration from local flora in an effort to orient human politics around bioregional concerns. Eileen Wold's "Square Meter" (2021) demarcates, by means of four metal posts, the size of forestland needed to balance out the carbon emitted by one gallon of burned oil, while her sly "Natural Security" (2021) — mirrored security domes, installed on tree trunks — humorously transposes retail surveillance apparatuses to a woody setting. Sam Spillman's whimsical "Bad Mouth" (2021) — a defunct youth camp bunk house, cut into sections and rebuilt, askew, atop a small pond — feels like a fun house designed by a mischievous naturalist.

While the contributions of Singer, Wold, Spillman, and others reroute symbols of private property, an even larger number of the exhibition's works operate on not just a symbolic, but also a practical, often remediative, level. Joel Olzak's inconspicuous "Drainage, Erosion, Dominion" (2021), for example, resembles a long, sinuous gash in the forest floor but also functions as an irrigation ditch to prevent erosion. Michael Asbill and Derek Stroup's trio of reclaimed white ash birdhouses, "Secret Hearts: An Interspecies Assembly" (2021), are designed to attract indigenous songbirds whose local populations have diminished on account of the Emerald Ash Borer beetle. Colin Lyons's elaborate, multi-purpose workstation, "The Laboratory of Everlasting Solutions" (2021), houses kooky, almost pataphysical, science experiments inside a plexiglass pod laboriously constructed to resemble a space shuttle's nose cone.

This blend of the practical and the absurd animates *Owning Earth*, hinting at its practitioners' complex relations to the land. Of all the artworks that demarcate territory, "Found (abortion) Monument" (2021), created by a collective called "how to perform an abortion" (Maureen Connor, Landon Newton, and Kadambari Baxi, with Eugenia Manwelyan), contains particularly troubled visuals. Using cat's cradle snarls of brightly colored parachute cord, the artists have cordoned off and labeled patches of already growing plants — goldenrod, loosestrife, common milkweed — used throughout history to manage human fertility. Similar to Evans's legal ploy, Spillman's warped bunk house, and Olzak's wound-like irrigation ditch, albeit to different ends, "Found (abortion) Monument" asserts agency through efforts to thwart someone or something.





Alex Young and Matthew Friday, "Solar Sallet" (2021), customized solar panels, transparent conductive oxide glass, titania nanoparticles, carbon, electrolytic solution, hydroponic system, spruce root ball, slipcast porcelain amphorae, welded aluminum, oak, sun, weather; plants include: pokeweed, Japanese barberry, garlic mustard, Japanese stiltgrass

Even when the intent is reparative rather than obstructionist, the sense of artistic agency remains fraught. Alex Young and Matthew Friday's biomechanical marvel, "Solar Sallet" (2021), illustrates how, in contrast to Romantic ideals of untouched nature, protecting the land can appear downright meddling. The installation's centerpiece consists of a cyborgian nest of tree roots, excavated piece by piece from a dying tree in Friday's backyard and reassembled, to impressive effect, by means of aluminum bars. Within and around the elevated root structure are several amphorae, each of which contains an "invasive" plant species; the plants's hydroponic watering system is powered by solar cells that run on homemade pokeweed berry dye and are situated in a tower that looks like an IV drip. Just as its rhizomatic splay of roots evince both dynamism and stasis, the installation's dystopic, sci-fi mood is in productive tension with its utopic, DIY ethos.

To its credit, *Owning Earth* explores such tensions without reducing them to a pat moral. Even as the exhibition proposes alternative paradigms of land ownership and art making, particularly compared to the rugged individualism of much early Land Art, it acknowledges that those alternatives create their own logistical and ethical entanglements. This recognition — that human agency exercised upon land is rarely pure good or pure evil — accounts for the mixed moods of many artworks in the show. More just, reciprocal relations to land would reconfigure, but not eliminate, the power dynamics of cultivation and control necessary to sustain human and non-human life at civilizational scale.

The married artistic duo of Sarah Max Beck and Robert C Beck are the contributors most explicitly tasked with negotiating this reciprocity. The couple often collaborates on eco-artistic projects as studioHydrostatic, but here they installed separate, side-by-side artworks when they couldn't agree on an idea for one joint work. Sarah Max Beck's Wine Cap mushroom patch in the shape of a large phallus, "Self Made Straw Man" (2021), takes the exhibition's absurdist streak to its most farcical extreme. Robert C Beck's solar-powered underground irrigation system, "Reversible Reactions" (2021), on the other hand, emphasizes function over form in the way it supplies water to the adjacent, overdetermined mushroom patch. This yin-yang send up of gender stereotypes is notable for its asymmetry: within the dyad, one artwork is all give, the other all take.





Jean-Marc Superville Sovak, "Between Starshine and Clay" (2021), found brick, river stones

It's no accident, then, that *Owning Earth* begins and ends with works reflecting on power imbalances. Jean-Marc Superville Sovak's terrestrial version of an encoded Underground Railroad quilt pattern, "Between Starshine and Clay" (2021), serves as the entryway to Unison's wooded trails and as a performance site for a ritual burial of white supremacy. But it's Christy Gast's concluding, "Blake's Hitch, Ladder Tie, Limb Loop (Treetopping)" (2021), that literally and figuratively ties things together. Using repurposed denim jeans stuffed with Poly-fil, the artist has bound the forked "crotch" of two tree branches with a chain of BDSM-inspired knots. The intricate contraption, situated well above the ground, is a symbol of temporary control rather than permanent ownership. Like the larger exhibition, it's asking uncomfortable questions about domination, consent, and the earth, without pretending there are easy answers to the binds humans create for ourselves and others.

Owning Earth continues at Unison Arts (68 Mountain Rest Road, New Paltz, NY) until June 1, 2022.