

Marie Celeste

Prior to his wildly successful invention of detective Sherlock Holmes and his colleague Dr. Watson in 1887, Scottish author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle penned an anonymous short mystery based on the actual events of the 1870s maritime vessel, the *Mary Celeste*. In 1883, Doyle published *J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement*, a fictional account of the ill-fated ship, which Doyle rechristened, *Marie Céleste*.¹ The crux of the original story, and Doyle's version of it, lies in the 1872 discovery of the *Mary Celeste*, abandoned and adrift in the Atlantic Ocean. The curiosity and intrigue that emerged derives from what the recovery team encountered upon rescue. Absent were the ten passengers and crew; yet, their personal items, food provisions, nautical instruments, and the ship's valuable cargo remained onboard and undisturbed. The passengers were never found, and the reason for their disappearance, though hotly debated, has never been fully explained.

More than a century after its discovery, the *Mary Celeste* remains a steadfast icon of popular culture as the quintessential, archetypal "ghost ship," whose inexplicable mysteries remain fodder for maritime historians, novelists, filmmakers, and myth-busters alike.² In recent years, *Mary Celeste* has become an adjective incorporated into the broader discourse of the scientific and agricultural communities. Now synonymous with the phenomenon of unexplained disappearances, *Mary Celeste* has come describe an environmental and ecological disorder afflicting the North American honeybee population known as "Colony Collapse Disorder" (CCD) or "Mary Celeste Disorder."

Beekeepers and bee scientists first reported the bizarre occurrence of colony failure in 2006.³ The syndrome particularly affects the hive's worker bees; they fly off in search of pollen and nectar but never return to the colony. Simply put: "Bees were not so much dead as gone."⁴ While scientists, beekeepers, entomologists, and others debate the causes of the disease—which range from the use of agricultural pesticides to the presence of newly discovered pathogens and bacterial fungal in the bees—all agree that the

effects of the rapidly diminishing bee population are having a profound impact on the production of food, local ecologies, and the global economy.⁵

This unsettling disorder joins a host of other environmental catastrophes that have traumatized various geographical locales around the globe lately. Despite living in a scientific and "ultra-technological" era, in which genetic codes can be transcribed and new solar systems have been discovered, the dynamic and spasmodic movements of nature's elemental forces—earth, air, and water—have left humankind in a state of perpetual anxiety and befuddlement. Searching for answers to "Why?; and, How can this happen?," we turn to the scientific experts to explain what we cannot. As Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek remarked in his 2010 opinion, "The End of Nature," our increasing reliance on specialized science should be questioned. He writes, "Today we look to scientific

experts to know all. But they do not, and therein lies the problem.... While science can help us, it can't do the whole job. Instead of looking to science to stop our world from ending, we need to look at ourselves and learn to imagine and create a new world."⁶ And, since pre-history, artists have been doing just that.

Artists have long held the responsibility of questioning reality and offering alternative viewpoints. Art makes room for change and possibility—it expresses visually what could be, or should be, rather than what is. As art historian Lucy R. Lippard has long attested, "It's

the artist's job to teach us how to see," and her notion of seeing has never been more urgent or relevant than it is today.

Despite its title, *Marie Celeste* is not an exhibition about bees or unexplained catastrophes. The eleven artists participating in the exhibition ask viewers to see and think about humankind's relationship to Nature—both as a physical environment and an idea—in a variety of ways. Ranging from site-specific installations to painting and photography, the diverse works in this exhibition enter a broad, polyphonic discourse on contemporary art practice and environmental consciousness that has been ongoing since the 1970s.⁷

In a post-industrial era of dwindling natural resources, rising populations and increasing urbanization, the works in *Marie Celeste* probe the boundaries that surround our moral and ethical obligations to care for our environment, now, and in the future, and make manifest the interconnectedness of ecology and technology in the 21st century. And, while the artists in *Marie Celeste* explore the conflicts between individual and collective actions, preservation and transformation, production and reclamation, and notions of disenchantment and optimism, their works are created from a deeply personal artistic practice that is grounded in the production of emotional affect rather than in the production of meaning.

In his seminal book *Ecology Without Nature*, scholar Timothy Morton argues that the primary obstacle to true environmental thinking and profound social change is the very idea of nature itself. For Morton, "Nature" is both an idea and an image that is bound up in the philosophy, literature, and visual art of Romanticism—which has long obscured the darker, more melancholic, uglier version of the non-human world.⁸ Moreover, Morton illuminates the ways in which nature writing in particular has separated ecology from nature, framing nature as an object that we consider to be "over there."⁹ In Morton's way of thinking, art has a specific role to play in shifting the way our society and culture think about environmentalism, ecology, and sustainability. If art helped construct a reified image of Nature, then it could help dissolve it as well.

In his recent prequel, *The Ecological Thought*, Morton further collapses the distance that we have put between ourselves and the environment, and expands on notions of coexistence and the interconnectedness between all beings and things. Again, Morton reiterates the critical role that art has to play in creating real change, writing: "Thinking the ecological thought is difficult: it involves becoming open, radically open—open forever, without the possibility of closing again. Studying art provides a platform, because the environment is partly a matter of perception. Art forms have something to tell us about the environment, because they can question reality."¹⁰ For many of the artists in *Marie Celeste*, their modes of questioning take the forms of objects that employ strategies of the beautiful and the sublime to subtly captivate and provoke, eliciting emotional responses.

In her photographs, films, and installations, Erika Blumenfeld captures the invisible temporal movements of natural and cosmological phenomena. Informed by phenomenology and the aesthetics of Minimalism, Blumenfeld creates art that translates the abstract and the ethereal into the substantial. Light, and its elemental properties, lies at the core of her practice, and she has captured its astral and earthly presence in spectacular, remote locations. In 2009, Blumenfeld traveled to Antarctica as a Guggenheim Fellow for her proposed *Polar Project*, and her months-long stay there yielded several bodies of work that describe this singular place in terms of topographical textures and intimate details. *Land Ice* (fig. 1) is one of three volumes of photographs that capture the stunning, ever-changing Antarctic landscape. The eight



Fig. 3
Jessica Schwind and Joseph Smolinski
Moon Puddle, 2010
Courtesy of the artists



Fig. 4
Shari Mendelson
Light Green Bottle, 2011
Courtesy of the artist

Notions of preservation and renewal permeate the works of Shari Mendelson. Her "upcycled" vessels—meticulously assembled from discarded plastic drink bottles—mimic in style the urns, goblets, beakers, and bowls of Western and Non-Western antiquity. Yet references to modernity also appear. Reformed plastics masquerade as ceramic and glass vases that once sat atop the shelves and tables in private, domestic interiors. With its attenuated form, irregular surface, and luminous transparency, *Light Green Bottle* (fig. 4) is emblematic of Mendelson's deft capacity for creating vessels that somehow look old yet new. Although Mendelson's works speak directly to the possibilities of renewal vis-à-vis the physical processes of reuse and transformation, her work also questions notions of connoisseurship and cultural perceptions of value—which have long been entangled with the old and the historical. In emulating the aura of an artifact while retaining an emphasis on the essential objectness of the vessel, Mendelson reveals the possibility of art to transcend, on a literal and metaphorical level.

Like Shari Mendelson, Jason Middlebrook views artmaking as a form of contemporary alchemy. In his sculptures, drawings, and site-specific installations, Middlebrook transforms the detritus of everyday life into poetic objects that confront our consumer values and propose optimistic alternatives to wasteful excess. In past projects, he has created large-scale, towering structures from the masses of cardboard containers and boxes bound for the recycling



Fig. 5
Alison Williams
Glasshouse #3, 2010
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 1
Erika Blumenfeld
Untitled (16 February 2009, 17:39:57 GMT), Antarctica Vol. 2 (Land Ice), 2009
Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 2
Joseph Smolinski
Disconnected Woodpecker, 2009
Courtesy of the artist



bin, and excavated wooden beams from piles of waste left in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, turning them into beautiful public benches.

Middlebrook's recent mobiles and architectural interventions are striking assemblages made from donated and reclaimed materials. While his works echo the formal lyricism and dynamism of early 20th century modernist sculpture, he adopts the use of impoverished materials and the methods of spatial displacement employed by the Arte Povera and Post-Minimal artists of the 1960s. In *Pile of Debris*, Middlebrook inlaid colorful mosaic tiles over objects culled from post-construction site waste. The patterned tesserae conceal the original materials, thus defamiliarizing us with the stone, wood, metal, and plastic that defines our built environment.

A frequent recipient of old screen doors, empty window frames, scrap lumber, commercial roofing and siding, among other domestic items, Alison Williams creates fantastic environments in previously discarded forms. Williams is an avid gardener whose artistic practice is an extension of a personal pursuit. She assembles quirky, rough-hewn green houses that resemble the humble shacks and potting sheds found in domestic backyards. A do-it-yourself world, a place of experimentation and nurture, the potting shed is the gardener's retreat. In her series of *Glasshouses* (fig. 5), Williams makes public this world of wonder; she invites viewers into the houses, allowing them to enter and explore new worlds.

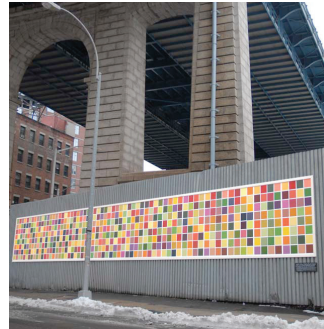


Fig. 6
Tattfoo Tan
Nature Matching System
(Dumbo, Brooklyn), 2008
Courtesy of the artist

Just as Williams transforms the potting shed into a place of fascination, Tattfoo Tan creates a collaborative, interactive project that asks us to reconsider our relationship to food through the his use color. Tattfoo developed *Nature Matching System* (fig. 6), a work that replicates the colors found in the fruits and vegetables in their purest state. With the artist's consent, a team of students created a version of *Nature Matching System* for Marie Celeste. And this vivid, large-scale mural recalls the artist's original installation in Brooklyn, New York.

In her participatory work, *Introduction to Water*, Mayumi Nishida orchestrates an immersive spectacle that simulates the essential element of life in real time. Nishida currently lives "off the grid" in rural New Mexico. Disconnected from urban services, Nishida creates her own supply systems by harnessing the forces of nature. Using LED lights, a ceramic container, collected rainwater and solar panels, Nishida creates a self-sustainable installation that demonstrates the increased necessity for a symbiotic relationship between technology and nature. As viewers pour rainwater into the ceramic pot, their actions, and gravity, trigger the LED lights overhead to illuminate like falling rain. Solar panels are utilized to collect electricity, which also activates the work. As water emerges as another natural resource of increased global contention, *Introduction to Water* uses the poetics of beauty to create a sense of urgency within viewers.

Nick Lamia uses the flattened pictorial surface of the canvas as a contemplative space to reflect upon ideas of nature and visual culture. Using a color palette of varying intensity, dynamic calligraphic lines, and tilted up perspectives, Lamia paints vibrant abstract works where fragments of real and imagined spaces coalesce. Elements of mapping figure strongly in Lamia's work, where macro and micro networks of lines converge, and become integrated into a single space. The seemingly random intersections of lines lend Lamia's work a topographical feel, evocative of a landscape that is there, but not there.



Fig. 7
Nick Lamia
Untitled (Structure), 2011
Courtesy of the artist

Lamia explores and exploits the slippages between

abstraction and illusionism through his use of color. He contrasts fields of opaque and transparent color, creating spatial distortions that translate into changes of perception. The depth suggested through the presence of



Fig. 8
Eva Struble
Bitumar Tanks, 2009
Courtesy of the artist and Lombard Freid Projects, NY

For Eva Struble, the flattened picture plane also becomes an active site of engagement and contemplation. Struble paints fragmented views of industrial vistas that are one step past their "use by" date. She renews their quiet magnitude and vitality. Empty riverfronts, piers, bridges, and processing tanks, become sites for pictorial invention. In *Bitumar Tanks* (fig. 8), Struble renders a cropped view of holding tanks with a West Coast palette. Pale rose and peach tones mix with opalescent grays and varying shades of cool blue to describe the surfaces of these toxic containers. The strong horizontal line acts as a visual and metaphorical barrier: it disrupts the harmony of the composition while acknowledging the unsettling reality that the tanks present. Struble's canvases are filled with a quirky melancholy and beauty. Her paintings speak of a time where unbridled production was paramount and without consequence.

Set against an alpine vista saturated with radiant color, humble cottages, hunting dogs, and an eighteenth-century explorer, a beekeeper hovers over swampy pools of virescent and vermillion-colored ground. Despite the presence of a sleepy-eyed goat beside him and the violet tree branch hovering overhead, the beekeeper remains fixated on his invisible task. *Rhodamine Mabel Bungaara* (fig. 9) is emblematic of Stephen Bush's ongoing serial depiction of beekeepers, first begun in 1988. Many of the paintings in this series depict a solitary beekeeper toiling away in groundless, technicolor landscapes.



Fig. 9
Stephen Bush
Rhodamine Mabel Bungaara, 2011
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Despite its pictorial clarity, the only narrative revealed by the artist is one that toys with notions of contrast and contradiction. Hidden beneath a protective suit and mesh veil, the beekeeper is both a noble caretaker and a profiteer of stolen goods. Such duality creates a yearning for stable absolutes, for solutions to seemingly confounding problems, like those that Colony Collapse Disorder and other environmental crises present. As the works in *Marie Celeste* attest, such solutions emerge as a result of changing behaviors and paradigmatic shifts in thinking. If indeed the impossible is becoming more possible, we need to learn some creativity to adjust our vision for the future.

(Endnotes)
1 Charles Edey Fay, *The Story of the Mary Celeste*, 168: 1988, 3rd edition, Toronto: General Publishing Company Co., 1988. Originally published 1942, Salem, MA, Peabody Museum. Fay is largely credited with authoring the first credible account of the Mary Celeste. His research incorporated personal letters and public documents about the ship and its holdings and transactions. Fay attributes the persistent factual distortion of the ship's account to the popularity of Doyle's 1883 mystery; see p. 143.
2 For a comprehensive discussion of the history of the Mary Celeste and relevant sources, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Celeste
3 Susan Millus, "Honeybee CSI: Why dead bodies can't be found," 5-6: Science News, December 20, 2008.
4 Sarah deWeerd, "Pollination Panic," *World Watch* 21, No.6 (2008).
5 According to the United States Department of Agriculture, "bee pollination is responsible for \$15 billion in added crop value, particularly for specialty crops such as almonds and other nuts, berries, fruits, and vegetables. In California, the almond crop alone uses 1.3 million colonies of bees, approximately one half of all honey bees in the United States." Accessed April 29, 2011. <http://www.ars.usda.gov/News/docs.htm?docid=15572>
6 Slavoj Zizek, "The End of Nature," *New York Times*, Dec 2, 2010. Accessed: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/02/opinion/global/02iht-GA12zizek.html?scp=1&sq=slavoj%20zizek&st=cse>
7 Recent group exhibitions addressing such topics include: "Unfold: A Cultural Response to Climate Change," organized by David Buckland, University of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria, 18 May - 8 June 2010; "Badlands: New Horizons in Landscape," organized by Denise Markonish, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, Massachusetts, May 24, 2008 - April 12, 2009; "Weather Report: Art and Climate Change," organized by Lucy R. Lippard, Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, Colorado, September 14 - December 21, 2007; "Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art," organized by Stephanie Smith for Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, October 6, 2005 - January 15, 2006.
8 Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
9 *Ibid*, 125.
10 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010.

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Organized by Liza Statton
May 12 - September 9, 2011

- Erika Blumenfeld
- Stephen Bush
- Nick Lamia
- Jason Middlebrook
- Shari Mendelson
- Mayumi Nishida
- Jessica Schwind
- Joseph Smolinski
- Eva Struble
- Tattfoo Tan
- Alison Williams