

ELIZABETH MAYNARD

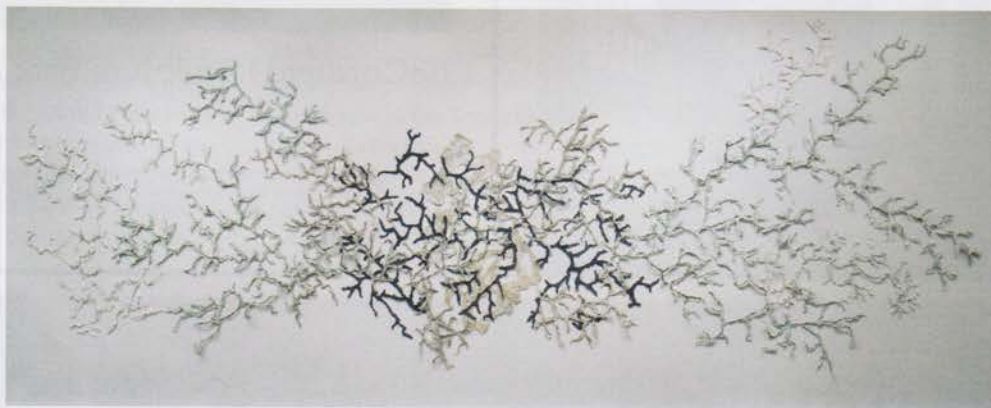
ReSeeding the City: A Multivenue Exhibition in Providence

May Babcock and Megan Singleton's *Ebb and Flow VII* winds its way along a nearly 30-foot-wide white wall, the silken handmade paper pressed from local plant fibers follows the dendritic paths of the Woonasquatucket River watershed along the interior of the Rhode Island State House's gallery space. Though much of modern philosophy is based on a model of the physical world that puts the natural and the built environment at odds, our rapidly shifting ecosystem is forcing us to confront how inextricable we are from our surroundings. *ReSeeding the City: Ethnobotany in the Urban* is a multi-sited and multimedia event that is part of the Providence Biennial for Contemporary Art. It includes an exhibition, a public forum at Brown University on October 26 and student workshops at Providence City Arts!, each examinations of the faceted relationship—sometimes antagonistic, sometimes harmonious—between nature and urban life, a mission made all the more urgent by the climate crisis.

Displayed in the voluminous hall on the lower level of the Rhode Island State House, the artworks serve as a sort of root system, elucidating the complex relationships between our daily operations and our environment. The space features niches which lend themselves elegantly to sculptural installation—look for Mo Kelman's seedpod-like *Things Still Here* (1990) and Scott Lapham's precariously posed *Exhibit A: Ladder* (2018)—and its main wide wall serves as an evocative ground for Babcock and Singleton's monumental map.

The 20-artist show includes an array of works that speak to the larger conversation around changing ecologies and “expose and explore a range of responses to the often antagonistic, seemingly irreconcilable forces of the urban,” writes curator Judith Tolnick Champa.

Artists such as Rick Shaefer and Esther Solondz evoke the Enlightenment-era impulse towards cataloguing and categorization, linked to an epistemology that often posited the natural and rational at odds. Shaefer's richly detailed charcoal drawing on vellum from his *Parson's Tale* (2018) series recalls the illustrations and discoveries of Ernst Haeckel, while also alluding to the memento mori quality of Dutch still lifes, as the arrangement of shells, flowers and insects dwarf the cityscapes of the background.



Megan Singleton and May Babcock, *Ebb and Flow I*, 2016, handmade paper pulp from Mississippi River mud, Abacá, cotton, American Lotus, 12 x 25'. Courtesy of the artists. Installed at the Springfield Art Association M.G. Nelson Family Gallery, Springfield, IL. Based on watershed maps of the Missouri, Mississippi, and Blackstone Rivers. *Ebb and Flow II* will be installed at the Rhode Island State House, Providence RI for fall.

Solondz's sculptures, by contrast, are living ecosystems in themselves. Her practice of late has been to combine plants with dormant materials—salt, iron, oil. The four enclosed glass cylinders display the transformation of these plants as intricate salt crystals to animate the otherwise sterile specimen jars.

Other works look towards the future, questioning what comes next, now that we've passed so many unprecedented markers of climate crisis. In her large-scale *Growth* (2018), Susan Erony illustrates a tree with an intentional seam at the site where roots emerge as trunks, branches, leaves. “I had trouble deciding how to bring meaning to the edge. Was it the cliff that we are going off of, the ever-changing edge of the land and sea or the edge of the seen and the subterranean?...I kept wondering what would grow in a post-Anthropocene era, the first creative force that flourishes after we are gone,” writes Erony in the exhibition statement. Similarly, Lapham merges his art and eco-

activist practices. His contributions to the exhibition are from his *A is for Anthropocene* series. The barnacle- and mollusk-encrusted objects are both texturally alluring and overwhelming; their sharp edges allude to the violent encroachment of the rising tide.

Champa remarks that the aim was not necessarily to select explicitly political work, but to point to the fact that environmental awareness and the imminent threats of climate change are automatically political. While there

is an implicit connection between the visual work and activist work, this link will be made explicit in the special forum, which engages activists and scholars working on ecological and urban place-based issues.

While all the artworks featured in the State House exhibition point to some facet of natural-urban connection, perhaps Margery Winter's wool fiber

Mend a City (Mendacity) most explicitly illustrates the evolving urban landscape in need of repair—a black-and-white city devoid of green. Such repair is both an ecological and deeply political project. The theme, artworks and format of *ReSeeding the City* encourage us to pause and consider what sprouts through the cracks in unexpected places, especially since these shifts will happen whether we're paying attention or not.

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**ReSeeding the City:
Ethnobotany in the Urban**
providencebiennial.com
October 25–November 27, 2019
Rhode Island State House, lower level
Providence, RI