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Earth

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Abstract

The author discusses nature's influence on different works of art, including references to the collection of the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art.

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EARTH

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Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, Great Salt Lake, 1970. 1500 ft. long, made from salt crystals, algae, black rock, earth, and water. Photo George Steinmetz ©

The artist's fascination with nature can be traced back thousands of years – a single bird perched on the branch of a persimmon tree in a painted Chinese scroll or a Roman fresco in an emperor's dining room that attempts to bring the beauty of the garden indoors. The history of European and American landscape painting is also rich, as can be seen in swelling skies of Constable, Turner or Thomas Cole.

More recently, in the 1960s and '70s, artists began to go beyond simply representing nature. They began to make art out of nature. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, above, is the most well-known early example of such an attempt. By manipulating the natural environment itself, artists call attention to its beauty as well as its vulnerability. And now, with the state of the environment in the news on a daily basis, this endeavor is experiencing its own renaissance.

In the past six months, more than 10 major museums in the United States have organized art exhibitions focusing on the environment.¹ Global concerns such as climate change, deforestation, pollution and species extinction are impacting artists' choices in their subject matter more than ever before.

The relationship between art and current events is, of course, well established. Art historians frequently point out to their students that art history is the visual record of our past, and that students simply need to glance through their textbooks to notice immediately the political implications – Caravaggio and the Counter-Reformation, Jacques-Louis David and the French Revolution, Picasso and the Spanish Civil War, the German Expressionists and World War II, etc. Today,

the evening news offers countless possibilities for the contemporary artist, but the environment has a particularly captive audience.

The efforts of recognizable spokespersons such as Al Gore, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Leonardo di Caprio and others have impacted the "Ecological Art Explosion"² which addresses environmental concerns in a variety of ways: some artists use recycled materials in their work and encourage a smaller "footprint" for their (and others') works. Other artists attempt to influence the larger culture by promoting solar power and alternative fuels.

New York-based artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, for example, creates what she calls urban Earthworks by transforming landfills. Her largest project involves 2,200 acres of contained trash mounds on Staten Island. She gives the trash mounds a second life by turning them into playgrounds and landscape art projects. Fritz Haeg, another contemporary environmental artist, is erecting urban wildlife habitats in his latest project titled *Animal Estates*, in an effort to draw displaced animals back into cities and suburbs.

Some contemporary artists represent environmental concerns within more traditional means and materials: oil on canvas. Several of these artists can be found in the painting collection of JCCC's Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art. Two artists, Angelina Gualdoni and Tomory Dodge, uniquely address this topic and were featured last fall in the Nerman Museum's first exhibition, *American Soil*.

¹Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, San Francisco Museum of Contemporary Art, New Museum New York, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, et al.

²This term was coined by Robin Cembalest in an article she wrote for *ARTnews* magazine in June of 2007.



Angelina Gualdoni, *Untitled*, 2007, acrylic and oil on canvas, 48 x 60", collection Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art - JCCC, gift of Marti and Tony Oppenheimer and the Oppenheimer Brothers Foundation

Angelina Gualdoni, *Untitled*, 2007

Gualdoni, a Chicago-based artist, depicts the destruction of human-made structures such as shopping malls, amusement parks and parking garages. Ironically, her subjects are created out of the colors of the earth – browns, greens, yellows, and golds at times overlapped by long drips of paint as if the earth itself were spilling out of the inorganic material. Gualdoni presents common architectural destinations in states of ruin and in turn challenges the viewer to recognize the human impact on the environment and our very notion of development and “progress.”

Tomory Dodge, *Wasteland*, 2007

Tomory Dodge also addresses (in his words) the “collision between nature and culture.” More abstracted in style than Gualdoni, Dodge’s paintings can require careful examination on the part of the viewer. Dodge depicts his subject matter in an eerily beautiful way that defies its poignant title, as can be seen in *Wasteland*. Using a vibrant, shimmering application of paint, Dodge infuses his canvas with light and color giving the scene a feeling of energy despite its lifelessness. Further, his representations of abandoned vehicles, desolate asphalt sprawl, or solitary trees in the landscape depict a sense of loneliness and isolation that defies our typical notion of the suburban community.

One of the many roles of the artist in contemporary society is to encourage the viewer to be actively observant: to stop for a moment, to reflect, to engage our emotions, and, perhaps, to think in new ways. If these works of art help the viewer reach a greater awareness of our impact on the world, then the artists have been successful. We all can use our unique abilities to make the world a better place, as the great architect Frank Gehry reminds us, “Find that small sliver of space in the world where you can make a difference.”



Tomory Dodge, *Wasteland*, 2007, oil on canvas, 72 x 84", collection Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art - JCCC