

Christine Neill: OBSERVATIONS FROM THE VALLEY FLOOR

Curated by Mollie Berger Salah

November 9 - December 15, 2019

American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center

Washington, DC

ALPER INITIATIVE FOR WASHINGTON ART



FOREWORD

Artist and philanthropist Carolyn Alper created the Alper Initiative for Washington Art as a place for artists in our region to find and build an audience, interact with their peers, and question perceived and received wisdom regarding contemporary art and culture. It is our aim to be accessible, provocative, and relevant. *Christine Neill: Observations from the Valley Floor* is the twentieth Alper Initiative exhibition we have presented, and it is right on target.

Who can forget the end of that first scene in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986)? The camera moves beneath the surface of a well-kept suburban lawn to discover a lurking nightmare. *Blue Velvet's* nightmare was human corruption lying just beneath the picturesque, Reaganesque facade of the 80s. Christine Neill's recurring nightmare is the environmental degradation of our planet. She has returned to that subject many times with increasing urgency over the past two decades. Layers of drawing, watercolor, and digital printmaking on the surface of her paper and in the glazing of her frames gives Neill's work a kinetic quality not unlike Lynch's motion picture. It implicates the viewer in the action down on the ground, a very uncomfortable place to be.

We are grateful to curator Mollie Berger Salah for bringing *Christine Neill: Observations from the Valley Floor* to the Alper Initiative, and for her excellent essay in this catalog. Similarly, we appreciate Stephanie Hanes' more scientifically informed writings in appreciation of Neill's physical and metaphorical dive into the "murky murk" supporting our world. Finally, it is so important to the success of any exhibition to have a great partner. Amy Eva Raehse, Executive Director, Vice President, and Partner in Goya Contemporary & Goya-Girl Press, is that indispensable person.

Jack Rasmussen
Director and Curator
American University Museum
at the Katzen Arts Center
Washington, DC

Opposite: Flight Lines (detail), 2012. Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper and Plexiglas, $46 \times 35 \times 1/2$ in.



By Mollie Berger Salah Curator

Christine Neill's paintings are visual explorations of the natural world. Examinations of plant and occasionally insect life are captured in intricately drawn, intimate views of the environment seen at ground level. Neill's works are not from the perspective of looking above or obliquely at her subjects. The viewer comes to the composition as if laying on the grass or forest floor. It is from the point of view of the animals and insects that inhabit these spaces that we, the human viewer, experience her work. She is particularly attuned to the biological cycle of plants and insects, opting for these subjects over other animals—including people. Yet, humanity is indirectly the subject of her work, or rather the environmental impact the human species has on the planet, stating that her work "notes intersections where environmental and anthropological worlds meet." Her watercolors are like snapshots of a world that most people pass through every day without noticing the life force contained within. Neill captures moments in time happening adjacent to us every day, but which go ignored.

In order to amplify this aspect of our environment that most people overlook, Neill tends to work on a large scale. The largest watercolor in the exhibition is 68 inches wide but represents only a small detail of a larger landscape. If one looks closely at her work, so that the composition takes over one's entire field of vision, the scene Neill has created envelops the viewer. One feels surrounded, and begins to notice the small details hidden within larger expressions of form and color. Her works demand to be viewed up close in order to experience the small moments of life documented in each composition.

While Neill finds inspiration in the natural world, she does not create her final compositions outside. Her studio is where most of the artistry takes place. After collecting plant and insect specimens, Neill generates a series of studies to explore the structure and form of her subjects. Eventually working up to the final watercolor painting, Neill constructs a faint drawing at full scale, and also will sometimes add a digitally-printed image over the initial drawing, creating a multi-media work. Layers of watercolor washes are applied to fill in the remaining empty space of the paper so that a majority, if not all, of the surface is covered.



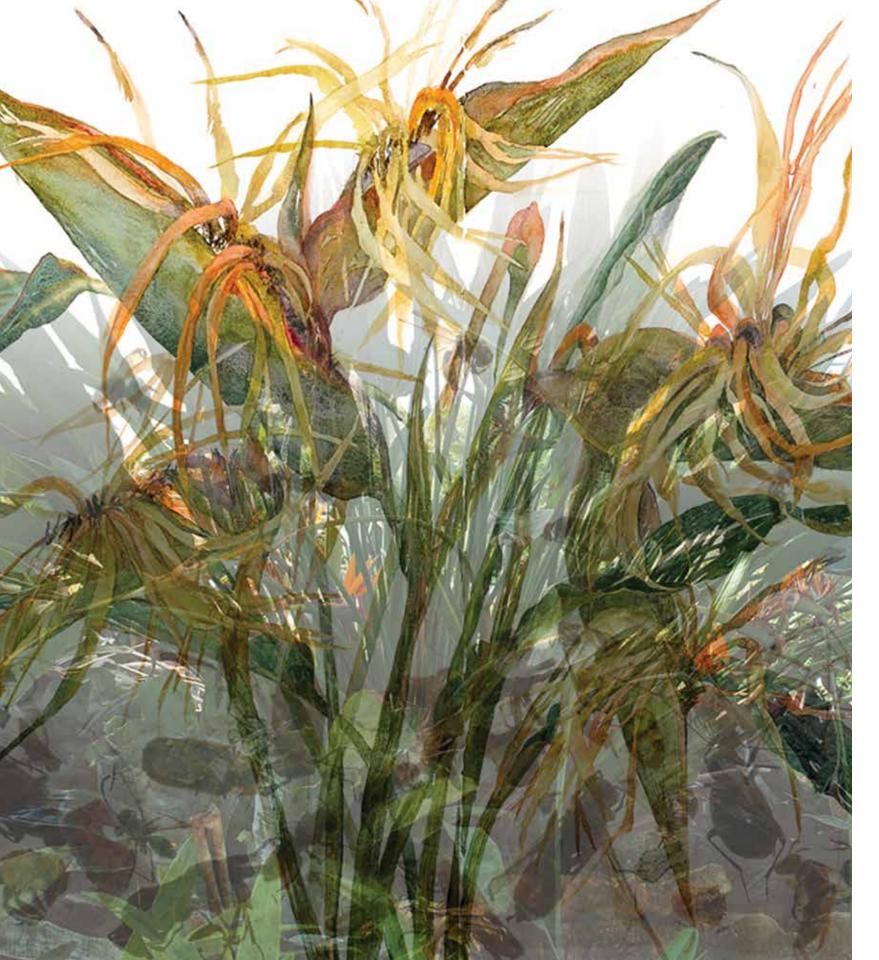
White Death (detail), 2019. Watercolor, archival pigment print on paper and Plexiglas, $34 \times 47 \ 3/4$ in.

The final material element is the framing. Neill will at times choose to print a drawing on Plexiglass that is used to glaze her watercolor paintings. The Plexiglass is separated from the sheet of paper with spacers, so the printed lines on the Plexiglass cast shadows on the paper, adding what appears to be dark line drawings on top of the watercolor and pigment-printed image. Following the lines created from the projected shadow acts as a road map across the watercolor, leading the viewer's eye to different components of the larger work.

Neill's use of print technology and her own hand is critical to the effectiveness of the final composition. The layers of human and computer-generated images mirror the overlapping presence of modern human existence and the natural world. Technology jux-

taposed with naturally occurring forms recalls our history as creatures constantly developing, and sometimes at odds, with the environment around us. Neill's paintings evoke sentiments of our modern world; human-constructed spaces that attempt to live alongside and within nature. This concept can be seen in the practice of many architects, and is intended to unite the surrounding environment and the plants growing around the newly constructed habitats. In this example, machine-made elements are layered with nature, just as it appears in Neill's paintings, where computer-printed images crisscross with her own drawn forms. These highly refined works speak to the impact humanity has on the surrounding environment.

¹ Christine Neill, "Artist Essay," https://www.christineneill.com/statement



A prime example of this theme is White Death (2019). What would normally be a brightly colored coral reef appears dull and pale, and the very top of the coral is starting to turn white. As rising sea temperatures kill off algae that feed the coral and microscopic zooxanthellae leave the reef, the coral starves and turns white. In Neill's work, this dissipating zooxanthellae is depicted on the Plexiglass, and therefore hovers over the drawn image, adding to the dispersing effect. The layered imagery echoes the faceted issue of climate change; the cause and effect of industrialization, a warming climate and its impacts on the environment.

In addition to demonstrating human impact on the natural environment, Neill's works uncover the rarely-seen symbiotic relationship between plant and insect life. *The Other Side of Par-*



Figure 1. Robert Havell after John James Audubon, *Baltimore Oriole*, 1827. Hand-colored engraving and aquatint, National Gallery of Art, 1945.8.12.

adise (2013) illustrates the connection between plants, insects, and organic decay. This work exposes the frequently ignored understory of plant life, home to small creatures and decaying matter. This lower layer of vegetation is critical to the overall health of the plant. The Other Side of Paradise shows the life cycle of the plant invisible to the average passerby, but observed and captured by Neill.

These works provide intimate views of unseen worlds, but they should not be taken as documentary. Neill draws inspiration from the natural world and has an abundant collection of plant samples to study in her studio, but also takes artistic liberties when crafting her compositions. In some ways, her work can be compared to that of John James Audubon

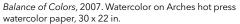
Opposite: The Other Side of Paradise (detail), 2013. Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper and Plexiglas, 31 x 44 in.

(1785-1851), a naturalist and artist who traveled through the eastern part of the United States documenting birds of North America. Audubon collected specimens, studied them, and meticulously captured the birds' characteristics. In this image of the Baltimore Oriole (Figure 1), Audubon also inscribes the bird's Latin name. He intricately captures two males and one female bird in their natural environment with a nest. The viewer is able to grasp an immediate sense of how these birds are found in nature. Audubon's life-sized watercolor drawings were sent to London for printing because the United States did not have printing presses that could handle such large sheets of paper at that time. The prints were then hand-colored in watercolor to match his originally executed paintings. These prints were bound and published as *The Birds of America* (1827, first edition). Audubon's use of printmaking made him one of the earliest American artists to use this technology.²

However, while Audubon and Neill are interested in elements of the natural world and utilize printing technologies of their time to execute their final compositions, Neill approaches her practice with a more artistic creativity than Audubon. He was an artist who carefully captured the precise character and appearance of his subjects. While Neill is attentive to how the plants and insects appear, she also enhances or alters that reality to create a beautifully executed image. This is not to the detriment of the composition, nor does it take away from the work's authenticity. Rather she approaches this practice as an artist and presents her subject matter in an elevated manner. Producing grandiose watercolors of discounted subjects draws the viewer in so that afterwards, when walking through the landscape, one might be more aware of plant and insect life after contemplating it up close in Neill's paintings.

These vibrantly colored, intimate examinations of flora that cover nearly the entire sheet of paper stand in contrast to the slightly more abstract work *Bromil Stripes* (2011). The composition is completely derived from scans of the plants. A pigmented print of a living bromeliad is layered with a scan of decaying bromeliad leaves. The manipulation of these images abstracts the original form, as one can only see portions of the living plant through a layer of dying leaves. Ironically, the color green, which is present throughout the layers, is brightest here. However, punctuations of green can be seen in the living plant images broken up by white stripes. It is a dynamic image representing vital leaves coming towards







Balance of Essence, 2007. Watercolor on Arches hot press watercolor paper, 30×22 in.

the viewer as the dying leaves seemingly hover above. As with Neill's other works, this composition presents the life cycle of the bromeliad, but differs materially, since the artist does not contribute her own watercolor imagery to the final work.

Some of the earliest works in the exhibition, *Balance of Colors* (2009), and *Balance of Essence* (2011), also skirt the line between naturalism and abstraction. Executed entirely in watercolor, these compositions are clearly of stones, impossibly balanced one atop the other. It seems as though the tower of stones could topple at any moment, yet they are so purposefully placed, as though they have been in this position forever. For Neill,

Annette Blaugrund, "The Artist as Entrepreneur," in John James Audubon: The Watercolors for The Birds of America (New York: The New York Historical Society, 1993), 29-30.

these images of stone towers recall cairns and markers, intentional objects that Neill has reinterpreted as something to behold. Balance is shown not only in how the stones are placed on the paper, but also in her color choices. *Balance of Colors* alternates between dark and light stones, while *Balance of Essence* appears as a gradation from light to dark.

However, it is Neill's use of negative space in these images that makes them striking. The contrast between the light background and the darker stones—especially in the areas in between two balancing stones—provides a true journey for the viewer's eye. One zigs-zags up and down the tower following the edge of the stone until the eye reaches the point at which two stones touch. For a moment, one sees a point of connection, of dark meeting dark, and then the eye continues on its path. The stone compositions are investigations of echoing forms and angles, of textures and colors.

Neill achieves a breadth of imagery from her exploration and study of plants. It has been a constant fascination for her to combine her two main interests: biology and art. Climate change and the earth's response to environmental threats inform her practice. Far from being purely documentary, Neill closely studies her subjects both outdoors and in her studio. She captures the spirit of her subjects and elevates them to a scale that is completely absorbing. Her work crosses between painting and printed image, reality and invention, but what remains constant is the relationship demonstrated between humans, the environment and natural lifecycles. Naturalist John Muir (1838–1914) wrote "Most people are on the world, not in it..." Neill's works puts us firmly in the world.



MOLLIE BERGER SALAH is the Curatorial Assistant for the Division of Prints and Drawings at the National Gallery of Art. Salah's research explores topics in modern art, specifically artists based in Washington, DC, such as Kenneth Noland and Thomas Downing. In 2016, her essay, "Centres of Energy," on Noland's circle paintings and the psychoanalytic therapy of Dr. Wilhelm Reich, was published in conjunction with Tate's *Refiguring American Art* research project. Salah is currently writing an article on painter Mary Pinchot Meyer. She received a Master of Arts in Art History from the George Washington University, and a Bachelor of Arts in Art History from the University of Vermont.

John Muir, John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1938) 320



By Stephanie Hanes

INVASIVE

In the late 1970s, when Christine Neill first moved into her leafy Baltimore City neighborhood, the streets were lined with elm trees. Soon, though, they began to die, victims to what has become known as the "Dutch elm disease"—a devastating fungus discovered by Dutch scientists and spread widely by bark beetles.

The fungus, which by 1989 had killed an estimated three quarters of North America's 77 million elm trees, is thought to have originated in Asia. Scientists believe it jumped across national borders with international commerce—death brought by a tiny, infected bark beetle nearly invisible in a shipping container; or perhaps by a compromised log, buried beneath a cargo of timber. It was one of the first times an invasive species sparked a widespread community response.

Neill and her neighbors were part of this effort and fought the fungus. They looked for signs of infection in their trees, they pruned branches faithfully, they made sure nobody brought in out-of-state wood to burn.

But still, the trees died. There are few elms left in the city, just as there are few clams left in the Cape Cod sand, which Neill remembers digging with her father so he could make chowder. Later, the Emerald ash borer would attack the trees outside of Neill's house in New Hampshire; and the tall, purply-pink loosestrife would take over the New England wetlands she loves, beautiful but invasive.

"These things are happening in my lifetime," Neill says.

It is little surprise that Neill has been attracted to this shifting equilibrium. She sees, and then creates, a harrowing beauty from the interplay between the invasive and the existing, this life-or-death dance taking place while we go about our daily lives.

Sometimes, as in the case of the elms, the march of the invasive is brutally apparent. It is in the spider-like markings on the bark of dying trees; the felled trunks and denuded branches.



Holey Leaves, Violet (detail), 2019. Watercolor on laser cut Arches hot press watercolor paper, 24 x 36 in.

Other times it is like lace.

In Holey Leaves, Violet (2019) Neill finds the sculptural beauty in a plant partially devoured by slugs and invasive insects. A longtime gardener—and the daughter and granddaughter of devoted gardeners—Neill says she still is struck by the beauty of the holes in summer leaves; the shapes they form, the hidden lives and hungers they represent.

Indeed, as her work suggests, there is complexity, even intrigue, underneath those labels of "native" and "invasive." Some of our most beautiful landscapes feature plants that lack the correct genealogy. The Baltimore of my childhood is shaded by the doomed Elms and sweetened by the profligate honeysuckle. The latter is an invasive from Japan, but as native as my memories.



Cloud of Witnesses, 2015. Watercolor, pencil and archival pigment print on paper, 37 1/2 x 50 in. Private Collection.

Across the world, the invasive acclimate, fit into new climates that we have created, evolve with new homelands, change them and become changed by them. The native, too, evolves. Rarely can a creature—or a society, a family, a country—be the same as it was generations ago, nostalgia notwithstanding. And, one might argue, it should not try.

Still, one only has to look at the scarred Elms to know the tragedy of mismanaged ecosystems, or the dreadful rapidity with which the balance of nature topples with human interference.

Often, we do not even notice the unravelling is taking place. As Neill shows in *Cloud of Witnesses*, it sometimes takes the broad green leaves of the Gunnera plant to notice the overwhelming number of invasive creatures in the muck beneath and around us.

Then again, varieties of the Gunnera itself are labeled invasive. In Ireland and Scotland, everyone from environmentalists to bio security experts warn against the big-leafed plant, which is often called the "giant rhubarb." At home along river banks and in shady gardens throughout the US, it is native to Chile, invasive in Europe.

Everywhere, Neill shows us, it is a witness—and a model, perhaps, for artists throughout this world.

ENDANGERED

In early 2019, a group of international scientists made headlines when they warned that nearly a million of the world's species were threatened by extinction. Around the same time, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which maintains the widely-cited "Red List" of threatened species—announced similarly dire findings. None of the species it analyzes had become more secure over the prior year, the group said. To contrary, nearly 30,000 of those 105,000 animals and plants were at risk of dying out, some imminently.

Across the environmental spectrum, scientists and policymakers reacted to these findings with alarm, but not surprise. For some time now, many have been warning that we are in the midst of the "sixth great extinction." In other words, there have been five times in the past half billion years that a large percentage of life on earth disappeared. Now, environmentalists fear, we are seeing number six.

Human behavior is to blame for this new extinction. Habitat destruction, over-hunting, and the dramatic increase in greenhouse gas emissions are among the myriad ways that people have impacted the earth like no other species.

This world-wide endangerment is terrifying and overwhelming.

It can also, in Christine Neill's hands, be joltingly beautiful.

For years, Neill has found herself drawn to those places in nature where toxicity and danger merge with the radiant. More recently she has embraced the *endangered*, those species and places that face the greatest existential hazard. *Disappearing Cavendish* (2017), for instance, has as its main subject the Cavendish banana—the most commonly eaten banana in the world, long favored by big agriculture, and now threatened globally by a devastating fungal disease.

The story of the Cavendish is layered in a way characteristic of Neill's work.



Disappearing Cavendish (detail), 2017. Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper and Plexiglas, 31×44 in.

In mid-twentieth century, the Cavendish was the answer to a different, devastating fungal infection: Fusarium wilt, also known as Panama disease. At the time, Panama disease was threatening to wipe out the Gros Michel banana, a variety that had been planted across the tropics by colonizers and their corporate successors. As growers scrambled to find an alternative, they came across the Cavendish.

It was not as tasty as the Gros Michel. But the Cavendish traveled well. And most importantly, it seemed to be resistant to the Fusarium fungus, which was not only destroying fruit, but the economies and livelihoods that depended on it.

And so, the banana growers swapped one monoculture for another.

There is a risk, though, when large corporate farmers decide that one, and only one, variety of plant will be grown. Not only does it push out other species by human selection and habitat consumption, the lack of genetic diversity makes it shockingly susceptible to disease, climate changes, and newly introduced pests. A monoculture is inherently endangered. And so, in some ways, it should not be surprising that Panama disease itself adapted and now threatens the Cavendish through a new strain, Fusarium wilt tropical race 4.

In other words, nearly all of the banana plants in the world are again endangered.

In Neill's *Disappearing Cavendish*, the forms are pleasing; the plants themselves gracefully fade into transparency. The work is light, even airy.

"A friend of mine saw that painting," Neill recalls. "She said, 'it's such a devastating story, but the painting has bright colors, is calm.' And I feel, well, that's the way things are happening. It's slow, it's not like the fires in California. It's happening around us and we're going on with our lives."

Neill recalls walking the beach on the remote, eastern coast of Puerto Rico, and picking up pieces of white coral. They were gorgeous, she remembers; a bleached ivory color that she didn't recognize. She took them home and put them in a jar.

Later, she learned, the coral was white because it had become stressed by warming ocean waters and had expelled the zooxanthellae algae that normally lives in its tissues. This algae provides the coral with its color and most of its food; without it, the coral starves. The white coral, it turned out, was endangered coral; a sign of endangered oceans and an endangered world.

Neill's piece, White Death, shows all of this—coral fading gradually to white, the algae on a separate layer, dancing away.

BENEFICIAL

One day not so long ago, Christine Neill looked across one of the sloughs of Lake Okeechobee, those low-lying waterways trudging toward the Everglades, and saw water-lilies. There were thousands of them, dark leaves bobbing on murky waters. Fingers of lemon-yellow petals reached skyward; a sweet fragrance escaped from the wetland stench of biomass and decay. The flowers were stunning; the sort of botanical form that has inspired painters for generations.

But Neill saw something else that day. Those lilies, their stout stems reaching downward into an underwater forest, were part of a complex ecosystem that not only controlled the health of Florida's wetlands but also captured significant quantities of carbon dioxide. In other words, lilies were not just pretty. Nor were they simply beautiful. They were beneficial.

Neill walked farther along the boardwalk. She began to photograph and sketch.

Increasingly, scientists are understanding the importance of "blue carbon," the label for that carbon stored in marine and coastal ecosystems. These areas, it turns out, hold a disproportionate amount of the heat-trapping element; it is stored in the muck and sediment and living plant matter of coastal and marsh regions worldwide.

When these environments are healthy, carbon stays out of the atmosphere. But when they degrade, the carbon escapes as a gas and the earth gets warmer. Lilies in Lake Okeechobee are native, a sign of the waterway's health and its contribution to climate stabilization.

It was all of this, Neill says, that attracted her to the plants and inspired her work, *Blue Carbon* (2019).

"As often happens, I have compelling experiences when we're outside and looking at the actual nature," she says. "And something I find that intriguing. Then it is combined with an idea that I've previously read about, or maybe I have the images and then read about it afterwards. The image comes together with the concept. In this case it was the phenomenon of blue carbon."



Mangrove Forest (detail), 2017. Archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper and Plexiglas, 31 x 44 3/4 in.



 $Blue\ Carbon,\ 2019,\ Watercolor,\ archival\ ink\ jet\ print\ on\ laser\ cut\ Arches\ paper,\ 30\ x\ 45\ in.$

But if lilies and blue carbon, are beneficial, they also exist on a knife's edge. Their role is layered, like Neill's work, with complexity and intrigue. Like many of her "beneficial" subjects—the milkweed pod that devastates gardens and nourishes butterflies; the thistle that plagues farmers and sustains honeybees; the insects that feast on her vegetable garden and support the food chain—blue carbon itself is not clear-cut. It holds both the possibility and precariousness of environmental balance.

It is this dangerousness, this imagining of the dreadful consequences, should these stores of invisible elements be released into our atmosphere, adds beauty, even honor, to the murky vegetation that Neill reveals underneath the recognizable orbs of waterlilies. For it is not only the lilies that are beneficial, but the mess beneath them; the murky muck so often excluded from our artistic images.

So it is with mangroves, another of Neill's biological subjects. It is their tangled mass of roots, stalks, and leaves that absorb nutrients, help stabilize coastlines, and create unique ecosystems; it is these, then, that are central in her work. In *Mangrove Forest* (2017), the entanglement of the underneath mixes with images from above the water. She also layers them with depth contour lines, as well as enlarged drawings of two-celled dinoflagellates, a type of organism live in the mangroves' ecosystem off the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. These "dinos" are responsible for the ethereal bioluminescence of Mosquito Bay; their blue glow intimately connected to the tangle of mangroves.

Unlike prior generations of artists who looked for some imagined purity in nature, inherent in Neill's work is the recognition that "beneficial" does not mean the same as "good," nor is it the opposite of "bad." That, Neill knows, is not how nature works. She avoids the romanticism that often creeps into botanical portrayals and instead creates something more affecting and emotional. She captures the connections, the intrigues, the nail-biting balancing act in which our natural world exists; her grasp of ecological systems and complexity turns her work into powerful environmental commentary.

Mangroves, while considered beneficial across much of the world, are seen as invasive in Hawaii. Lake Okeechobee and its lilies have also been the focus of significant debate recently. Scientists, politicians, and environmental activists argue over the correct depth of the 730-square-mile lake. Some worry that the rising water levels, deeply polluted by phosphorus, could devastate the littoral zones where the waterlilies thrive and where blue carbon is primarily stored. Others argue against draining the lake, which they worry will create water shortages throughout southern Florida and contribute to algae contamination throughout the state, including the infamous "Red Tide" that has devastated beaches there.

Beneficial is harrowing, beautifully, complicated.

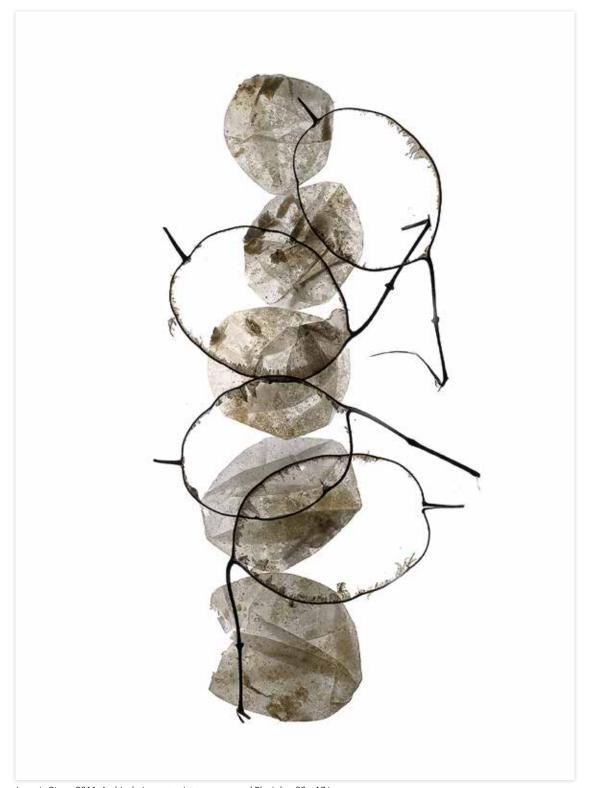
Christine Neill: Observations from the Valley Floor



Holey Leaves, Violet, 2019. Watercolor on laser cut Arches hot press watercolor paper, 24 x 36 in.



Circle Bract, 2011. Archival pigment print on paper and Plexiglas, 17 x 23 in.



Lunaria Rings, 2011. Archival pigment print on paper and Plexiglas, 23 x 17 in.



Balance of Colors, 2007. Watercolor on Arches hot press watercolor paper, 30 x 22 in.



Balance of Essence, 2007. Watercolor on Arches hot press watercolor paper, 30×22 in.



Five Stages of the Palm with Bees, 2012-2014. Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper and Plexiglas, 23 1/2 x 68 in.



Disappearing Cavendish, 2017. Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper and Plexiglas, 31 x 44 in.



White Death, 2019. Watercolor, archival pigment print on paper and Plexiglas, 34 x 47 3/4 in.

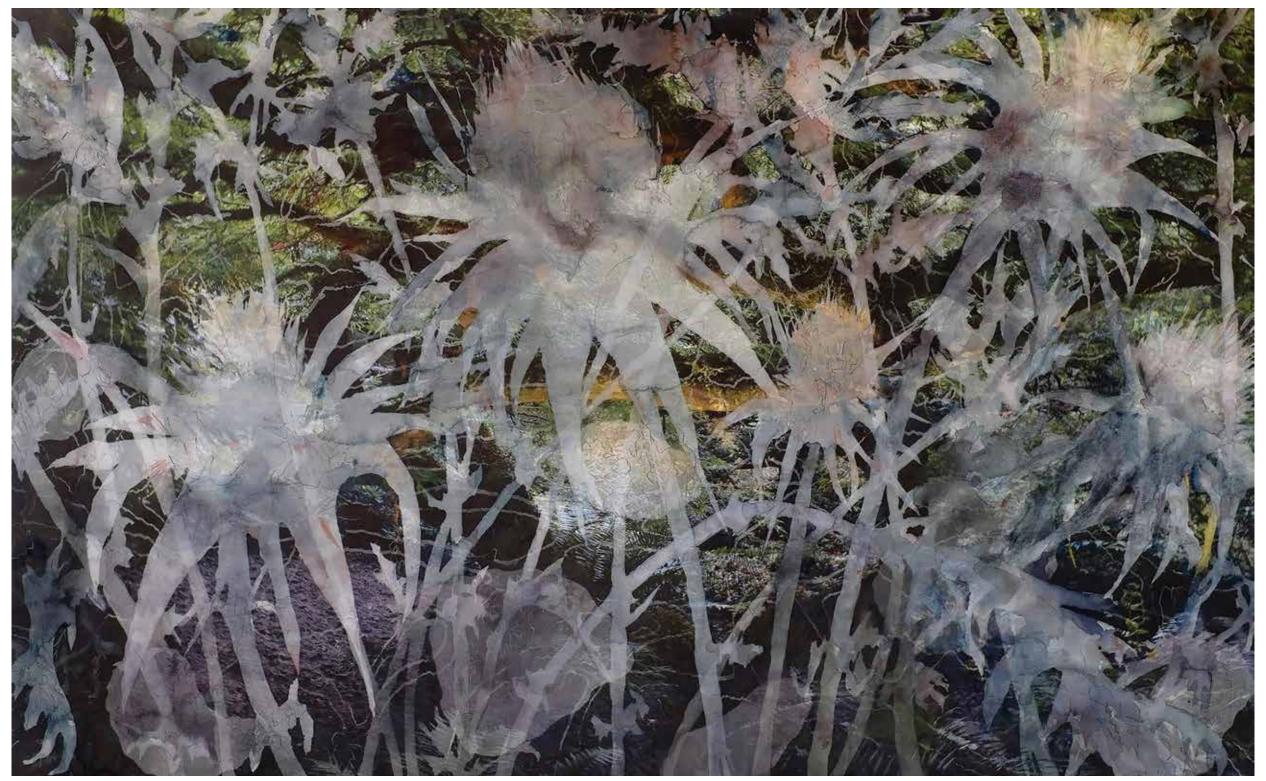
40 | CHRISTINE NEILL | 41



Mangrove Forest, 2017. Archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper and Plexiglas, 31 x 44 3/4 in.



 $\textit{Flight Lines}, 2012. \ Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper and Plexiglas, 46 x 35 1/2 in.$



Just Weeds, 2014-2015. Watercolor, pencil, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper, 30 x 45 in.



Night Wings, 2013. Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper and Plexiglas, 30 x 43 in.



 $Strangler\ Fig$, 2019. Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper, double layered laser cut paper, 39 x 28 1/2 in.



Orpheus' Orchid, 2011. Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper, 47 x 36 in.

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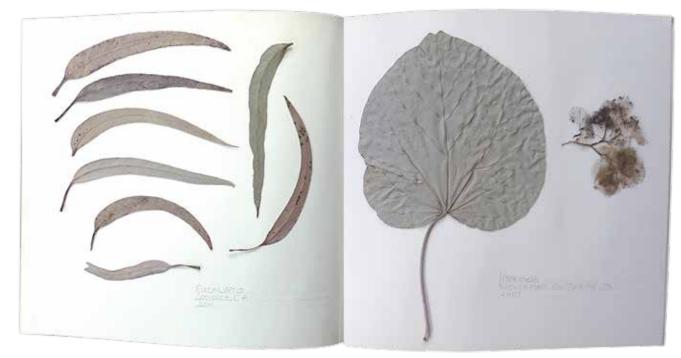
The Other Side of Paradise, 2013. Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper and Plexiglas, 31 x 44 in.



Aechmea Carcacas, 2008. Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper, 43 x 28 1/2 in.



Three Days, 2005. Watercolor on Arches hot press watercolor paper, 42 $1/4 \times 27 \, 1/2$ in.



Herbarium, n.d. Preserved plants composed in bound book, 12 x 12 x 2 1/2 in. closed, 12 x 24 1/4 in. open.



Bromil Stripes, 2011. Archival pigment print on paper and Plexiglas, 23 x 17 in.

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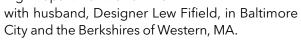
CHRISTINE NEILL

I had the great fortune to grow up in a family that valued being outdoors, education, and our neighbors. Our Manchester, CT neighborhood backed into wooded acres lined with old stone walls. Both parents were trained in the sciences, and for them, relaxation was building and maintaining our gardens. My maternal grandmother taught me to identify native wildflowers on woodland walks and took me to see the Glass Flowers at The Harvard Museum of Natural History for the first time. Early on, our vacations were spent near Cape Cod Bay. In retrospect, it seems simple, safe and open to options and opportunity.

Memorable high school courses were biology and art, because they both combined hands-on activity with intellect. I distinctly remember my first look through a microscope at water plants I had collected, then drawing their close-up details. I began drawing on my own, enjoying the quiet concentration of the projects. When I entered Skidmore College as a bio major, I continued taking drawing and painting classes. It was a natural transition from the examination of living things in a lab to visualizing those processes as imagery in paintings and prints. I can date my interest in the effects of climate conditions on human activity, and the converse, to a lecture by Margaret Mead, although I found the concepts she presented startling and confusing.

At the end of the 1960s I arrived in Baltimore, to work with Grace Hartigan at the Hoffberger School of Painting, Maryland Institute College of Art. While my painting skills and concepts were maturing, Grace taught us how to be artists.

My work has been exhibited widely in the United States, as well as France and Japan. I am represented by Goya Contemporary in Baltimore and my work is included in many private and public collections including the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts. The honors I've received include a Maryland State Arts Council Fellowship and the Mel-Ion Arts Grant. I'm Professor Emeritus from MICA's Painting Department and live



While a great deal has changed in the natural world, my process echoes early experiences, walking woods and beaches, collecting stones and plant material. I line my studio with the gathered specimens, which I research and drawn as I layer imagery into painted and digital mediums. Similarly, the concepts have evolved from representing the natural shapes I found wondrous, to visualizing the conditions of the climate crisis. The work celebrates the intricacies of thriving ecosystems, yet laments threatened species. Such dichotomies, in nature as in art, bind us together as living entities in, on, and of the earth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a 21C fine artist, I work collaboratively with many exceptional professionals. Without them, this work and exhibition would not have been possible. A huge "Thank You" to Jack Rasmussen, Director of the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, who supported this exhibition from the beginning; and to the incredible, competent staff at the AU Museum for managing the myriad components that go into a museum exhibition: Kristi-Anne Shaer, Associate Director; Elizabeth Cowgill, Marketing & Publications Specialist; Kevin Runyon, Preparator; Carla Galfano, Registrar; Jessica Pochesci, Assistant Registrar, Sharon Christiansen, Manager, Museum Operations & Visitor Services. Tim Doud and Zoë Charlton, faculty at AU for helping initiate the opening dialogue for the exhibit. You are both the finest of colleagues.

My ongoing appreciation to the special team at Goya Contemporary, Amy Raehse, Martha Macks, Marian Simms, and Emily Vollherbst, for their support, attention to detail, and their good cheer regardless of the situation. A special shout-out to Marian for doubling as my studio assistant this year.

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Front cover: Disappearing Cavendish (detail), 2013. Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper and Plexiglas, 30×43 in.

Inside front cover: Strangler Fig (detail), 2019. Watercolor, archival pigment print on Arches hot press watercolor paper, double layered laser cut paper, $39 \times 28 \, 1/2$ in.

Back cover: Balance of Colors (detail), 2007. Watercolor on Arches hot press watercolor paper, 30×22 in.

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