

## Ecological Art Infused by Memoir and Identity

Gyun Hur's and Shoshanna Weinberger's installations emphasize poetic innuendo rather than overt autobiography.



Louis Bury June 5, 2021



Gyun Hur, "So we can be near" (2021), hand-shredded silk flowers, vinyl print, mirror, hand-blown glass, and river water (all images courtesy of the artist and Wave Hill, photos by Stefan Hagen)

Curated by Eileen Jeng Lynch and installed on either side of Wave Hill's Sunroom Project Space, Gyun Hur's *So we can be near* and Shoshanna Weinberger's *Fragments of Perception* speak to one another in their subtle use of materials, particularly mirrored glass, as well as their thematic concern with how the forces of history and environment shape personal and familial identity. More than just resonating with one another, the two installations fit within a trend of

contemporary eco-minded art that poetically finds its form through a combination of historical archaeology and oblique autobiography. Such works are notable not only because a sizable contingent of artists lately feel compelled to produce them, for reasons I'll explore, but also because they address the personal, political, and ecological ramifications of historical marginalization.

Hur's exquisite installation consists of a large vinyl print — a palimpsest of 15 family photographs — placed on the floor and surrounded on three sides by engraved, floorboard-height mirrors that extend the viewer's perception of ground-level space. The mottled gray print appears abstract, with only whispers of discernible referents (ripples in the Delaware river; outlines of Hur's mother-in-law tending a garden); regions of it have been dusted with finely shredded yellow silk flowers that hum like algae blooms. A series of teardrop-shaped glass bottles, each filled with river water, hangs on the back wall. The entire Light and Space-esque installation has a devotional quality to it — as though in tribute to an unspecified loss — in keeping with the artist's meditative performances, realized upon similar installations, such as her early 2020 *I wouldn't know any other way*, at BRIC.



Shoshanna Weinberger, "Fragments of Perception" (2021), double-sided acrylic mirror, fire glass, dimensions variable

Weinberger's diaphanous installation also takes up questions of perception and identity, only with a maximalist aesthetic. Upon a wooden plinth with mirrored top, the artist has arranged 80

pounds worth of translucent fire glass shards that seems surprisingly lightweight. Jutting out from that pile, as well as dangling above it from fishline affixed to the ceiling, are numerous laser cut forms, made of double-sided mirrored acrylic, that evoke fern fronds, but whose individual leaflets, upon closer inspection, also resemble stilettos — a nod to the “[Strangefruit](#)” female figure that recurs throughout the artist’s work. This cornucopia of reflective surfaces — which play off the light and the greenery outside the Sunroom’s windows, as well as each other — produces shimmering, hall-of-mirrors effects that hint at identity’s inherent multiplicities and distortions.

Both *So we can be near* and *Fragments of Perception* draw on personal experience yet don’t disclose its particulars in the artwork itself. Hur’s photographs of her family’s migration from South Korea to New York blend into the installation environment, while Weinberger’s representations of her biracial Caribbean-American heritage refract and distort that environment. The emphasis in both is on poetic innuendo rather than overt autobiography. Enough other eco-minded contemporaries are working in a similar register that the trend deserves greater consideration.

Rachelle Dang’s installations, for example, contain foreboding sculptural transformations of 18th-century European botanical transport carriers alongside tender sculptural recollections of flora from Hawai’i, where she was born, to create associative connections to colonialism across time and space. Kiyon Williams incorporates soil into smart, sensuous sculptures and performances that explore the embodied connections between transatlantic slavery and contemporary Black trans\* identity. Christine Howard Sandoval uses the material of adobe to reflect on her family’s Obispeño Chumash ancestry and the insidious undertones of imperial architecture. Numerous other contemporaries, as often as not women of color — Alicia Grullón, Gabriela Salazar, Patty Chang, Allison Janae Hamilton, Marion Wilson, Jean Shin, Mo Kong, Levan Mindiashvili, Zac Skinner — have also recently made work that explores how their identity intersects with the forces of history and ecology.





Shoshanna Weinberger, "Fragments of Perception" (2021), double-sided acrylic mirror, fire glass, dimensions variable

Such works may differ in their material and conceptual details but they incorporate personal content in ways that bear a noteworthy affinity with Hur's and Weinberger's installations. The content, often transformed or half-hidden, is essential to the work but is not its entire point. The crucial thing is how those personal aspects have been embedded in a larger context. This approach seems of a piece with recent literary nonfiction that blends nature writing with memoir, such as Helen MacDonal's bestselling *H is for Hawk* (2014), a genre that has drawn interest in part because its narratives illustrate the concrete, personal stakes of abstract, apparently impersonal phenomena such as climate change.

But the comparison to eco-memoir is imperfect because visual art is inherently more immediate than literature, which perhaps explains why *So we can be near* and *Fragments of Perception* can operate effectively in an allusive, rather than narrative, register. Another work of literary nonfiction, Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2006), though not eco-oriented, nonetheless provides a helpful perspective here. The book narrates Hartman's mostly impossible attempt to find traces of the transatlantic slave trade, including evidence of her own family genealogy, in modern day Ghana, and has become a touchstone for writers and artists reckoning with traumatic silences that are at once intimate and historiographic. Hur, Weinberger, and others are likewise concerned with how to depict personal knowledge whose haunting implications extend well beyond the individual.

Shoshanna Weinberger: Fragments of Perception *and* Gyun Hur: So we can be near *continue at Wave Hill (4900 Independence Ave, Bronx, NY) until June 27.*

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