

## Rocks, Waste, and Water

Ecological anxiety in shows by Davino Semo, Katherine Wolkoff, and Aaron Morse.



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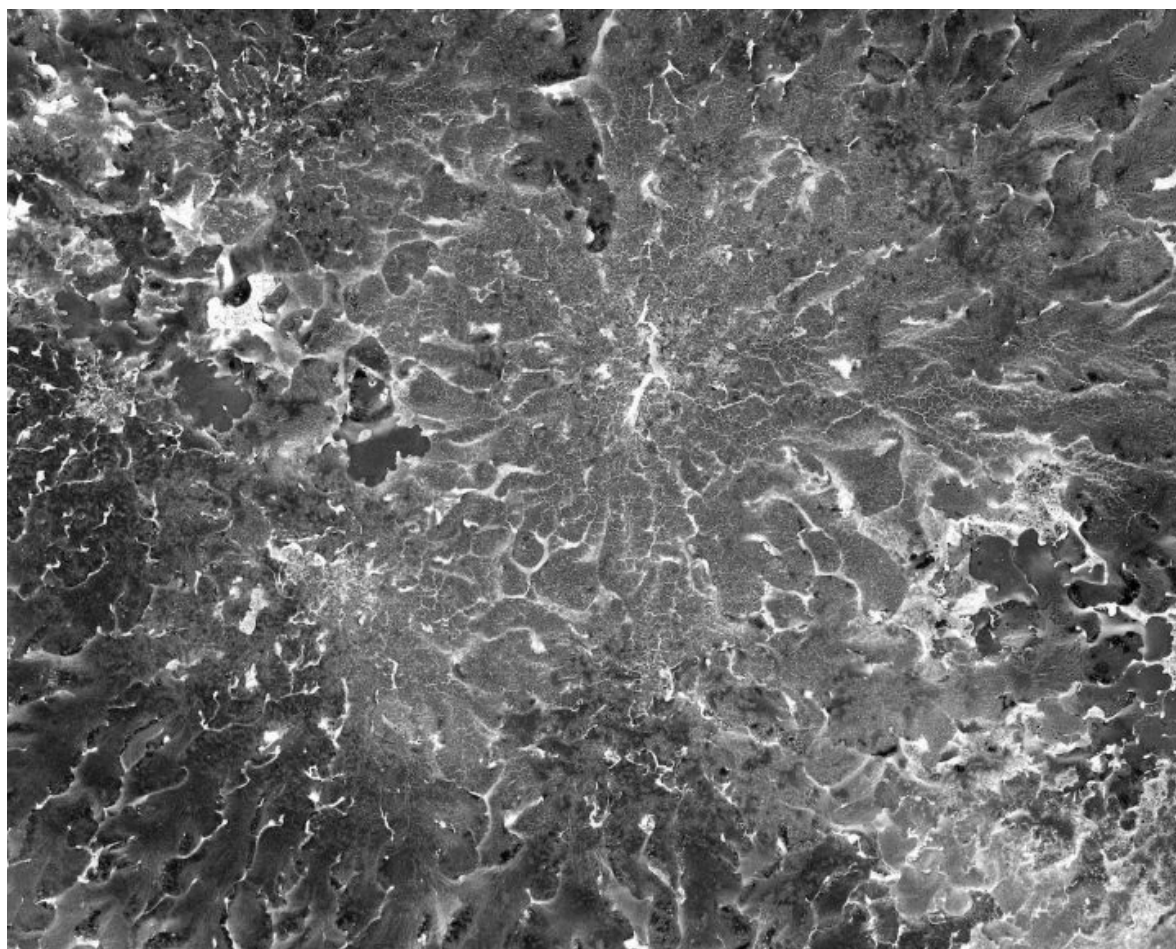


Davina Semo, *ALL THE WORLD*, Marlborough Contemporary, installation view (image courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Contemporary, New York and London; photograph by Pierre Le Hors)

At Marlborough Contemporary, Davina Semo's *ALL THE WORLD* addresses our era's ecological anxiety with disjointed ambition. Half a dozen large rectangular bales of industrial waste — each at least 30 x 65 x 42 inches in size and comprised of either aluminum scraps or frayed wires — are dispersed on the gallery floor. Affixed to each bale is a black, powder-coated metal chain that connects to the ceiling; dangling from it, at eye level, is a craggy, matte-black cast bronze bell that viewers can ring. On the surrounding walls hang monochrome acrylic mirrors, whose wavy neon surfaces are dotted with the ball bearings used for skateboard wheels and fidget spinners.

The mirrors amplify and distort the looming, enigmatic presences of the interconnected bales, chains, and bells.

While the works' spatial relationships are well articulated — the dangling chains and bells have the Sisyphean aura of gym equipment — their conceptual relationships are less developed. Semo's signature all-caps, sentence-long, third-person feminine titles — for instance, "*BECAUSE WE ARE FACING AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT AND THERE IS NO TIME TO CONTINUE DOWN THIS ROAD OF MADNESS,*" *SHE SAID* (2019) — announce an ecological emphasis new to her work. But the works themselves, a tonal jumble, have less to say about such anxiety. The mummified bales and portentous bells possess a solemnity at odds with the funhouse effects of the freckled mirrors in bright, Koons-esque colors. The point seems to be that the human world distracts itself with baubles — fidget spinners and showy art — as its doomsday hour approaches, but, in its penchant for the obvious aesthetic gesture, Semo's version of this well-worn argument participates in the phenomenon it purports to critique.



Katherine Wolkoff, "Lichen, Flavoparmelia Caperata" (2017), silver gelatin, 40 x 50 inches (image courtesy of Benrubi Gallery)

Katherine Wolkoff's *The Critical Zone*, at Benrubi Gallery, also suffers from a vague conceit, though the individual works are refined. "Critical Zone" is a scientific term referring to the layers of soil, water, rock, vegetation, and living organisms that co-exist, and sustain human life, in the areas just above and below the earth's surface. Wolkoff's large-scale gelatin silver prints render

this heterogeneous zone in intricate, stylized black-and-white abstractions whose referents — swirls and splotches of lichen; striated and craggy rock formations; roiling bodies of water; reticulated bark beetle marks — are only sometimes discernible without the works’ titles. Shot from a variety of perspectives, such as bird’s eye views and microscopic close ups, then altered in post-production, the images belong to a strain of contemporary photography — including the work of Edward Burtynsky and Justin Brice-Guariglia — that documents the environment with an imaginative twist.

The exhibition coheres by virtue of Wolkoff’s eye for texture, light, and form, as well as her instinct for barely subdued drama. But, as realized here, the promising conceit of the “critical zone” lacks the individual images’ precision and bite. The conceits of Wolkoff’s two previous series — *Birds* (2012), silhouettes of taxidermied birds collected by early 20th-century naturalist Elizabeth Dickens; and *Deer Beds* (2013), matted impressions in tall, reedy grass made by sleeping deer’s bodies — both enhanced her adroit camera work through their poetic specificity. The conceit of this work has a catch-all diffuseness that manifests in the series’ disorienting scalar and perspectival shifts.



Aaron Morse, “Mt. St. John (Color Variant Blue)” (2018), acrylic, watercolor and ink on paper, 24 x 20 inches (image courtesy of Benrubi Gallery)

Concurrent at Benrubi’s Project Space, Aaron Morse’s *Elements of Geology* comes with less eco-conceptual packaging than *ALL THE WORLD* and *The Critical Zone* but its vivid paintings



suggest complex ideas. Incorporating both watercolors and acrylics, the paintings depict land- and seascapes as dense amalgams of hallucinatory color. The works' constituent forms — mountains, trees, waves — are rendered in historical styles, such as Japanese woodcuts and nature-guide illustrations, crammed alongside and atop one another in slightly implausible configurations. Each form or group of forms is comprised of an even more implausible color: a sickly, pale pink mountain range; a minty cluster of turquoise and teal trees; seafoam streaked with shades of saffron and peach.

Morse's offbeat, almost psychedelic color schemes hum with a radiation glow not unlike that of fellow eco-surrealist Alexis Rockman's canvases. Yet despite its sense of tumult and discord, Morse's work evinces little ecology anxiety. The manner in which his land- and seascapes appear out of whack reflect a sophisticated acceptance that nature has never been natural in the ways we like to imagine. The contrast between the exhibition title's scientific literalness — *Elements of Geology* — and the works' crazy quilt coloration drives home the point. In their deliberate unnaturalness, Morse's paintings highlight the false dichotomy between nature and culture that underpins much contemporary ecological theory.

Neither too obvious nor too vague in its conceptualization, Morse's work points up how terms like “ecological” and “environmental” can be deployed as an art branding strategy akin to the “green” label applied to consumer products. Vanguard theorists such as Timothy Morton emphasize how ecology as a concept implicates literally everything, but this capacious sense of the term can be a trap. An indistinct ecological anxiety understandably tinctures much of what we do and make these days; what matters, when it comes to art, is how and why this anxiety receives expressive form.

**ALL THE WORLD** by Davina Semo continues at Marlborough Contemporary (545 West 25th Street) through February 16; The Critical Zone by Katherine Wolkoff continues at Benrubi Gallery through March ; Elements of Geology by Aaron Morse continues at Benrubi Gallery (521 West 26th Street) through March.