

Art

At Union Studio, Artists Engage in Serious Play Around Notions of Ecology

The eco-arts studio confronts dire realities with artistic resourcefulness and pluck.



Louis Bury April 25, 2019



Union Studio (image courtesy of Jessica Segall)

When the 2018 Two Trees' Cultural Space Subsidy Program awarded [Jessica Segall](#) and [Mary Mattingly](#) a shared 1,800-RSF DUMBO studio space at below market rent, it gave the two artists the opportunity to think collaboratively, and big. "I'm not used to having this much space," jokes Segall, "It makes me want to host." The two friends have dubbed their airy new space Union Studio. They are using it as both a workplace and a salon-style community meeting place focused on eco-arts programming. "There are a number of spaces in New York that take scientific approaches to ecology," explains Mattingly, "but we hadn't found one centered around art and

ecology.” Segall adds that artistic approaches to ecology can explore “ways of seeing other than just data-driven science,” citing Union’s feminist, queer, and animist bents.



Jessica Segall, still from *(un)common intimacies* (2018) (image courtesy of Jessica Segall)

Mattingly and Segall are themselves celebrated artists whose solo [work imagines alternative ways](#) humans might coexist with nature. Mattingly’s *Swale* (2016–present), for example, is a barge that navigates New York City waterways; upon it she grows and gives away food to circumvent the city ordinance that makes it illegal to do so on land. Segall’s short film, *(un)common intimacy* (2018), depicts her interacting, in a slow-motion underwater pas de deux, with predators, such as tigers and crocodiles, kept on private animal preserves.

Through its artist-in-residence program, workshop series, and speaker series, Union’s programming reflects its founders’ playful, imaginative approach to art-making and community-building. The inaugural speaker event, for example, featured artists David Brooks and Mark Dion in a mock-serious debate about the scientific and aesthetic merits of “Birds vs. Fish.” Color-streaked silkscreen prints of minerals, *Under Construction Series – #rock 1-19* (2018–19), made by inaugural resident artist Nadja Frank, have transformed one wall of Union’s common area into an impromptu exhibition space. Even events that feature academic heavyweights emphasize informal dialogue and exchange, as in a conversation between curator Amanda Parmer and feminist Marxist scholar Silvia Federici. “I think of the studio as a social space,” notes Mattingly, “For me, that’s how it functions best.”



Silvia Federici event at Union Studio (image courtesy of Jessica Segall)



From Mary Mattingly's Soil Library (image courtesy of Mary Mattingly)

This lively and accessible approach is evident in a “Soil Workshop” series that Mattingly conducts, at Union Studio and elsewhere, as part of an Ark-like “Soil Library” that she is compiling. Workshop participants, encompassing both school classes and the general public, bring soil samples with them and then write short narratives from that soil’s point of view. “Soil and humans used to co-exist peacefully,” laments one such narrative, written for a biology class at St. Francis College and gamely titled “The Bronx Tale,” “but in the year 1639 a human named Jonas Bronck established the first settlement of the area.” Another narrative expresses the sample’s trepidation at being separated from its soil “family” in the Brooklyn Botanical Garden, then recounts the science behind its family’s neighborhood history. In de-centering our human perspective, the soil narratives approach the study of science and of history from an offbeat, creative angle.



Union Studio (image courtesy of Jessica Segall)

In all its ventures, Union Studies embodies this same spirit of serious play. Public discourse about ecology tends to be off-puttingly dour and hortatory, full of grim scientific data about climate change and futile political ultimatums about civilization’s doomsday tipping points. Segall and Mattingly have no illusions about these dire realities but instead confront them with artistic resourcefulness and pluck. Their approach maintains a much-needed element of aesthetic and interpersonal pleasure in face of an intangible and profoundly unpleasant crisis.

On Friday, April 26, Union Studio (20 Jay St. #1019, 10th floor, Dumbo, Brooklyn) is hosting a conversation between Heather Davis and Oliver Kellhammer on “Plastic: Intimate Forms of Oil.” More information on Union Studio is available at [@whatisunion](#). Information on applying for studios in 2020 is available [here](#).
