

Take a Virtual Nature Walk at Wave Hill

The cultural center has successfully reimagined an exhibition to better suit an online presentation.



Louis Bury August 8, 2020



Alison Moritsugu, "We are the ash (Remnant)" (2015), oil on ash log, 55 x 23 1/2 x 1 3/4 inches (image courtesy the artist)

While there's been no shortage of virtual arts programming since March's coronavirus closures, Wave Hill Public Garden's online group exhibition, [*Eco-Urgency: Artists Make the Case*](#), stands out for two reasons. First, the exhibition is more of a weekly video programming series — in which the participating artists do things like lead virtual nature walks or converse with a curator — than a showcase for the art itself (only nine images of artworks are on the exhibition webpage, one for each artist or artistic duo). This approach is a clever solution to the problem of how to render what was planned as a brick-and-mortar gallery exhibition in an online-only format.

Rather than try to replicate online what the in-person gallery experience would have been, the curatorial team (Jennifer McGregor; Jesse Bandler Firestone; Eileen Jeng Lynch; Ginger Dolden) substantially reimagined the exhibition to better suit its new medium.

At a time when arts audiences have more virtual programming options than food choices on a diner menu, what makes *Eco-Urgency* unique is how little its program focuses on art. That sounds like a backhanded compliment but I mean it as unreserved praise. Four of the exhibition's nine weekly videos have been released at the time of this writing and only one of them discusses and displays the featured artist's own work. Moreover, the videos are all between 10 and 30 minutes long, a length that allows for exploratory depth but that doesn't tax the viewer's attention span. These qualities make for a refreshingly un-self-centered exhibition, one in keeping with ecological values, from artists whose work is mostly lesser known. What makes this approach particularly effective is that the artists discuss aspects of scientific ecology about which they have real, often deep, knowledge. Watching them share that knowledge not only enhances your appreciation of their artworks but also is a joy in its own right.



Candace Thompson, "Introduction to Foraging with Solar 1" (2020), video still (image courtesy the artist)

Take Candace Thompson's "Introduction to Foraging with Solar 1," which provides a high-spirited overview of foraging safety and ethics. Thompson works as the Wild Food Educator at lower Manhattan's Stuy Cove Park, a publicly forageable food forest co-managed by New York City's Economic Development Corporation and by the alternative energy non-profit Solar 1. The 12-minute-long video is packed with information about *Chenopodium album*, or lambsquarter — a resilient, spinach-like plant sometimes regarded as a weed but whose leaves and seeds are staple foods in several cultures — while posing big picture questions about food sourcing and

consumption. Buoyed by Thompson's frank charisma and jocular textual overlays, the thought-provoking video feels like a TED talk minus the genre's careerist grandiloquence.

For their respective programs, both Rachel Frank and Susan Rowe Harrison recorded themselves leading virtual nature walks. As Frank guides the viewer through Brooklyn's Fort Greene Park in "Hidden Worlds" she demonstrates how even a small urban park teems with ecosystemic communications that mostly elude human notice. The tour not only evidences Frank's extensive knowledge about everything from woodpecker holes to plant scents but also situates that knowledge in the context of political events, such as the recent Black Lives Matter uprisings.

Harrison's "Mediated Walk in Juhring Nature Preserve" likewise emphasizes that "we [humans] are our environment — it is not separate from us," but she takes a more aesthetic tack. Her tour, paced comfortably, with slow camerawork and moments of narrative silence, lingers on sculptural configurations of forest objects. Yet it's not without the bittersweet awareness that many things she finds beautiful, such as larval patterns in leaves, are actually "destroying some of the plants in the forest."

As a secluded public park whose gardens and Hudson River views are as much of a visitor draw as its art gallery, Wave Hill has long offered arts programming with a naturalist bent. But it would have been easier, when transitioning *Eco-Urgency* online, to hew closer to other arts institutions' content formulas — for instance online viewing rooms, interviews, panel discussions. *Eco-Urgency* does incorporate some tried-and-true formats: a conversation with Alexis Rockman has already been recorded, another is planned with the duo of Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens, and a studio visit is planned with Alison Moritsugu. Yet even the conversation with Rockman, one of *Eco-Urgency*'s better known artists, works so well not simply because it focuses on his lesser-known field drawings but because it offers fascinating glimpses of those drawings' archaeological and ecological backstories. The urgent case that's being made in this eco-art exhibition has little to do with art, which is an obvious thing for a critic to point out but a hard thing for an arts organization to achieve successfully.

Eco-Urgency: Artists Make the Case *continues online via Wave Hill through August 18.*