

Songs for a

SCORCHED EARTH

Beatrice Modisett's Paintings and the Post-Natural World

As we embrace the twilight of the early twenty-first century, it is high time to admit that nature is no longer natural. Ours is an age of planetary engineering on an unprecedented scale. "In every respect," writes philosopher and environmentalist Jedidiah Purdy in his book *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (2015), "the world we will inhabit will henceforth be the world we have made."¹ In this cogent text, Purdy theorizes a politics for navigating this new world called the Anthropocene, a geological epoch in which human activity now registers on the Earth's strata and climate. Purdy urgently asks readers, how do we foster a sense of common responsibility toward the changing planet? Beatrice Modisett's paintings seem to anticipate this call, becoming poignant allegories for the dynamic between human beings and the "natural" world of our creation. Modisett's painterly gestures, spills, and pours can be understood as sites of tension in which natural forces and human activity collide and vie for the final composition. In the following essay, I will elucidate how Modisett's paintings perform this balance, but ultimately underscore the ways she frames the Earth as an active agent, not merely a passive, exploitable object or repository for human activity.

Modisett and I first befriended one another at Richmond's Virginia Commonwealth University while she completed her MFA, a period of significant development in the artist's trajectory. In her studio on 1000 West Broad Street, Modisett honed her singular technique of handling paint, a careful choreography between control and chance that the artist still deploys today, as evidenced by her paintings in *Scorched Earth* at the Maier Museum of Art. Modisett navigates the spectrum of paint's viscosity: pigment mixed with various amounts of mineral spirits spills, pours, and puddles across the canvas. More recently, Modisett has collided these free-flowing sections with dramatically raked swathes of tar, wax, and charred wood. The artist's fluid, tumultuous canvases from her 2016 thesis show "Perspectives" at the Anderson Gallery in Richmond, VA represented an important culmination of research into how paint interacts with gravity and the canvas. Modisett presented viewers with various perspectives of abstract imagery that interweaves detached, yet immersive views of sublime landscapes, extreme weather, and tectonic catastrophe.

Beatrice Modisett,
The Dunes on Pluto,
oil on canvas,
114 x 144"
2016



Beatrice Modisett's painterly visions in works like *The Dunes on Pluto* and *Sailing Stones* conflated the macro and the micro, the virtual and the corporeal, all in an effort to conclusively jettison limiting views of the world. As the artist eloquently explains, "I'm interested in that which is omnipresent but imperceptible."⁹²

In *The Dunes on Pluto*, measuring twelve feet across, ponds of indigo, ultramarine, and steel coalesce in such a way that the painting appears to collapse under its own weight. This effect is not arrived at by accident. Modisett's research into ecological processes have informed the artist's pursuit of establishing within her paintings a tense coexistence of erosion and creation, omnipresent yet imperceptible forces that operate on geologic timescales. Her paintings are produced by the processes that form our earth: evaporation, puddling, accumulation,



Beatrice Modisett, *Sailing Stones*, oil on canvas, 65" x 70", 2016

sediment dispersion. The result is an undulating surface that recalls muddy, crumbly terrain and the smooth richness of an image on-screen.

Modisett's work engages with a storied tradition of abstract painting. The action of pouring paint, for instance, evokes the vitality of Helen Frankenthaler, the late American modernist who pioneered a technique for staining unprimed canvases with elegies of vibrant tint. Describing her idea of a successful painting, Frankenthaler notably explained: "A really good picture looks as if it's happened at once. It's an immediate image."³ Modisett's paintings gesture toward Frankenthaler's; as they breathe saturated pigment to create an "immediate" picture of the planet's physical forces.

However, a compelling dynamic also emerges when considering her works in relationship to those of German artist Anselm Kiefer, whose painting *Landscape with*

Wing (Landschaft mit Flügel) (1981), in the collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Modisett encountered while living in Richmond. The land occupies a critical position in Kiefer's oeuvre, a theme exemplified by the imposing painting. A desolate field, tilled and perhaps even war-torn, becomes a melancholic stage to which the artist affixed a lead wing. Kiefer's countryside is blackened, burnt, and encrusted with straw and impasto. The artist, born during the sunset of the Third Reich, uses painting and landscape as means of reckoning with his nation's calamitous past. The wing refers to the Norse myth of Wayland, a crippled blacksmith who fashioned himself devices of flight in order to escape enslavement. Thus the earthly and the angelic coalesce in Kiefer's picture. While *Landscape with Wing* might exude the feeling of a dead, scorched earth, the painting also emits signals of waning life. Whenever I visit Kiefer's canvas at the VMFA, I contemplate it from a bronze, circular Michele Oka Doner bench *Io* (1990), and study the painting's intricate textures. A nondescript stanchion, less than a foot off the ground, prevents visitors from touching the painting's coarse, fragile surface. Forces of time and gravity have gently shed grains of the painting's straw, which accumulate like snowfall underneath.

All of Modisett's paintings are entropic. They chip, flake, and slowly degrade, not unlike *Landscape with Wing*. They are living organisms that mirror our planet, perpetually arrested in a state of becoming, change, and decay. After Modisett completes her compositions, the physical forces of the cosmos become the agents that actively determine the fate of the painting. The title of Modisett's work *Sailing Stones*, for example, lends itself to this idea. It refers to the enigmatic sliding stones of Death Valley National Park in California, boulders that glide across sand dunes without human

Anselm Kiefer (German, 1945-),
Landschaft mit Flügel
 (Landscape with Wing), 1981
 Oil, straw, lead on canvas
 130"H x 218"W
 330.2 cm x 553.7 cm
 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,
 Richmond.
 Gift of the Sydney and Frances
 Lewis Foundation.
 Photo: Katherine Wetzel
 ©Virginia Museum of Fine Arts



intervention. After decades of speculation, scientists suggest these mysterious geologic phenomena, which can leave trails as long as fifteen hundred feet and move boulders that weigh several hundred pounds, occur through an ideal combination of wind and melting ice.⁴ The earth is not merely a place for us to deposit our waste: it acts, transforms, and responds, with or without us.

Kiefer worked natural material into the painting's surface itself, and Modisett has increasingly integrated earthly matter into her creative practice in order to arrive at her terrestrial compositions. *Sailing Stones* was the first painting that implemented rocks as a technical aid into the painting process. "I finished that painting at 5 a.m.," recalls Modisett, after an intense twelve-hour session. Modisett had been experimenting with paint pours for some time, but she

recalls "need[ing] a weight" in order to allow liquid to pool in specific sections of the composition. Consequently, the idea came to her to use a "chunk of the landscape, [and] put it on the painting." Modisett happened upon these first rocks at a construction site in Richmond (they were "very utilitarian," she remembers). This technique, which registers in the center of *Sailing Stones* as dark blue circular impressions flanked by running pigment trails, allowed Modisett to leave "not a fossil, but a record" of the earth in the painting. Fluid dynamics and the artist's movements accumulate into a choreography that performs the painting.

When making a painting, "I think a lot about my relationship and the viewer's relationship to the piece, and illusion versus allusion," explains Modisett. For Modisett, there's a key difference between

"illustrating a space versus alluding to a space," and by bringing in actual objects, it allowed her to amplify the tension between the representation of space and the mere suggestion of it. Ultimately, for Modisett, "If you see and understand a space within the work as one that you could potentially inhabit, and recognize that it seems to be in upheaval or is disintegrating, –"it creates [a sense of] empathy"– with the painting."

The paintings in *Scorched Earth*, such as *Ears Ring and Teeth Click*, represent the subsequent evolution of this thinking and process, and also points toward the sense of catastrophe that Kiefer's landscape evokes. When Modisett produced *Sailing Stones* approximately four years ago, she was just beginning to experiment with her painting and spilling techniques. Now, after many trials and much research, Modisett can predict with a certain degree of accuracy how her floods and will unfold on the canvas. To create these recent works, Modisett has introduced new variables into the painting's surface: wax, tar, and burnt wood congeal into a thick, chunky material obstacle around which painting can pool and flow. This materiality broadcasts an apocryphal resonance with Kiefer's landscape: *Ears Ring and Teeth Click* was created during our time of perpetual war, a time when the Amazon and Australia burn, seemingly without end. Modisett's recent paintings thus strike an ominous tension between the vitality of the earth's geologic processes, and a singed earth, absent of life. They are lamentations, expressions of grief for the planet that, the more we attempt to dominate, seems to slip out of our control.

There is another new direction for Modisett worth noting in this exhibition: the debut of monumental charcoal drawings, a medium that enables the artist to scale her work significantly. She developed such sweeping, dusty works as *Every Flower Touched, It's Under My Nails and It's Under My Collar*, and *Who'll Fix this Broke Beat Star*, which contain gestural forms of mountains, gales, and waves specifically for the Maier Museum of Art. Curvilinear marks and erasures, approximately the length and arc of the artist's reach, become frenetic registers of the drawing's own becoming. After years of painting, Modisett revisited drawing while in residence at Palazzo Monti in Brescia, Italy. While painting, Modisett constantly negotiates with physical forces outside of her power that ultimately affect the work's final aesthetic. Through charcoal, the production of the work

becomes more of an experience of control. "Nothing about this, really," suggests Modisett, "is the charcoal doing what it inherently does, whereas the paintings are all about embracing the natural course of the poured material." In that sense, these works pursue a direction that is less medium specific. The drawings also mark a significant shift in perspective: the artist always paints from a top-down, bird's eye perspective, and charcoal drawings create more frontal confrontation between the artist's body and the work. Finally, the material of charcoal enhances further the notion of a "scorched earth." Harvested from the pit fires the artist uses to harden her recent ceramic sculptures, Modisett finds novel methods of lengthening the lifecycle of her materials. The creative process becomes a poetic metaphor for the precarious state of our planet today.

Climate change often conjures visions of disappearing glaciers, rising sea levels, and ebbing coast lines. But the fossil-fueled engineering of our planet occurs in close proximity to places like Lynchburg. The Maier Museum of Art is nestled between the proposed Mountain Valley and Atlantic Pipelines. Currently, the constructions of these natural gas pipelines have been halted as regulators review the projects' environmental impact.⁵ Indeed, there are many important artist-activists, from the Virginia River Healers to Mary Mattingly and Dear Climate, who engage with the politics of climate change through their art. Modisett's work represents a perspective shift toward our planet during this critical juncture in history. Her paintings reveal an active world brimming with spirited matter, and humans become merely one kind of agent within a larger web of ecology. — Owen Duffy

¹Jedidiah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 3.

²Beatrice Modisett, interview with the author, 11/14/2019. All other quotes from the artist in this essay are from the same interview.

³Helen Frankenthaler, quoted in Barbara Rose, *Frankenthaler*, (New York: Harry Abrams, 1972), p. 85.

⁴See Ralph D. Lorenz, Brian K. Jackson, Jason W. Barnes, Joe Spitale, and John M. Keller, "Ice rafts not sails: Floating the rocks at Racetrack Playa," in *American Journal of Physics*, Vol. 79, No. 1, January 2011.

⁵As of December 17, 2019 the Atlantic Coast Pipeline has been paused pending a U.S. Supreme Court review of case related to a lower court's revocation of U.S. Forest Park Service permit for pipeline construction. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission has stopped the construction of the Mountain Valley Pipeline while it reviews the project's impact on the region's endangered species.