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SPOTLIGHT

ART REVIEW

## ART REVIEW: MCLA Gallery 51's 'Reflecting Ecologies' focuses on the artists' very personal relationships

By Lauren Levato Coyne, Eagle correspondent

Oct 13, 2023

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If a moth could see and know herself in a mirror, what would she think of herself and would we treat her any differently?

PHOTO PROVIDED BY MCLA GALLERY 51

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NORTH ADAMS — “Reflecting Ecologies: Artists in Nature,” MCLA Gallery 51’s current group show features six artists engaged with nature as observers, interpreters and witnesses.

It’s a tender exhibition that never slips into the sometimes twee or reductive tropes about nature. The artists have all developed very personal relationships with the natural world. These idiosyncratic works make a rewarding and

contemplative exhibition. For those of us who spend as much time as we can outdoors, the works will feel relatable and well-considered.

### **If You Go**

**What:** "Reflecting Ecologies: Artists in Nature"

**With:** Bill Botzow, Joan Hanley, Melanie Mowinski, Malaika Ross, Gregory Scheckler and Ashley Eliza Williams

**Where:** MCLA Gallery 51, 51 Main St., North Adams

**On view:** Through Nov. 17

**Gallery hours:** 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesday through Friday.

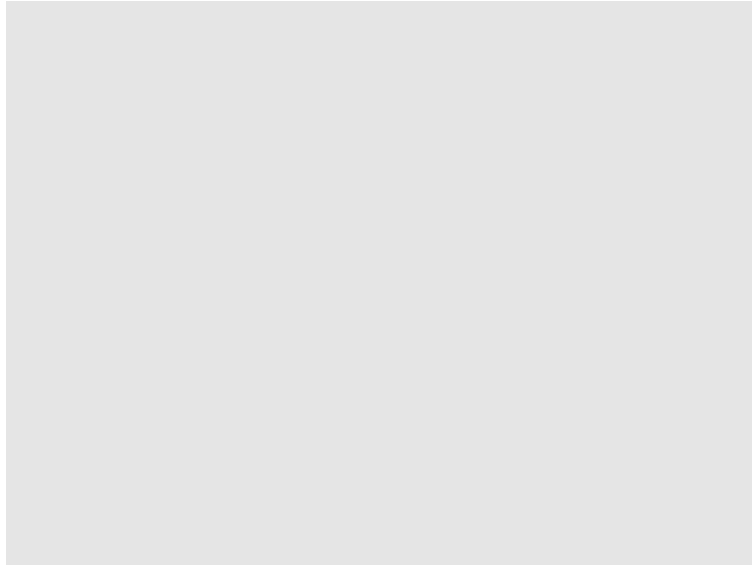
**More information:** 413-662-5320, [mcla.edu](https://mcla.edu)

Bill Botzow presents six wooden sculptures for this show. The former Vermont state representative collects local wood to make his assemblages. Installed in the gallery window, "Wig" is a seductive tangle of buckthorn roots mounted on the wall. This piece exemplifies the importance of the artist's gaze — Botzow saw this tangled mound of dark, fuzzy buckthorn roots and understood it needed nothing more from him. The simple act of leaving it unaltered, after its relocation of course, was enough. Removed from the visual cacophony of the woodland and installed on a gallery's white wall, the complicated mass is a reminder of many other things: the historic loss of trees to climate-related disasters and logging, black holes, a rat's nest, a porcupine. It also brings to mind the ongoing issues around invasive species, which common buckthorn is in both Vermont and Massachusetts

Asiatic bittersweet vine is also an invasive that Botzow uses in his work. "Payback" is a small cord of chopped bittersweet wrapped in rope that hangs from the ceiling. It's a beautiful object with a title that speaks to frustrations felt in the ongoing battle against invasive species, some of which are very aesthetically pleasing despite their destructive growth. Botzow also uses sections of wood that have been destroyed by invasive insects that leave behind beautiful but devastating patterns in the tree's soft tissue. In other pieces, the artist mimics these patterns to momentarily confuse the viewer and hint at the question of who may be doing more damage, humans or the invasive species we battle?

Ashley Eliza Williams has three works on paper on view. A painter and sculptor, Williams' work sits at a captivating intersection of science and dream, of real observation and imaginative narration. This strategy gives viewers the chance to have some editorial distance to regard what might otherwise induce fear or confusion (like insects, or even the idea of nature itself).

Two of the paintings, "House Centipede" and "Ghost of House Centipede," are inspired by field drawings with handwritten scientific notes. Williams is wildly more inventive than scientists are permitted to be. "Ghost of House Centipede" includes verifiable data about centipedes including details on their life span and the function of their antennae. But the artist also includes



Artist Melanie Mowinski is very concerned about the watershed and what we take from it and leave or insert in it.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY MCLA GALLERY 51

citations such as “credit to the centipede I accidentally squished in my bathroom two weeks ago. Credit to the centipede currently roaming my house I see from time-to-time: a small, pale centipede with delicate antennae and a ravenous appetite for spiders.” These types of notations bring a sense of humor, wonder, joy, and even the honor of eulogy to an important arthropod that typically startles humans, causing many among us to shriek and throw things at it.

A larger work by Williams, “Green Moth Observing Herself,” is a

diptych with a small mirror attached to the front so that the moth may see her own reflection. It’s a playful way to get directly at our ideas of human-centered consciousness. If a moth could see and know herself in a mirror, what would she think of herself and would we treat her any differently? It’s a wonderful set of thoughts to have and has the potential to stay at least some hands who might otherwise be too quick to squish with intention, accidental squishings notwithstanding.

Malaika Ross, a Caribbean artist now living in the Berkshires, included four small works on paper. By focusing on soil and the microbes that live in it, Ross upends the idea of observational drawing and painting but also ideas about what makes a drawing or painting “realistic,” which is typically a hallmark of observational art. At first glance, Ross’ works are abstract graphite drawings but after looking more closely, and understanding her process and her titles, it’s clear that Ross is drawing what she sees. Typically this world is invisible to us —and also abstract even when we are laid low by some microbial pathogens. “Funneliformis Mosseae” is a type of fungus that forms symbiotic relationships with plant roots. “Bacillus Subtilis” is a cousin of E. coli but unlike its relative, is a beneficial bacteria in many ways.

Melanie Mowinski, a mixed media artist, activist and MCLA professor of fine and performing arts, also presented four works that span many materials, including audience interaction. Mowinski is very concerned about the watershed and what we take from it and leave or insert in it. In “Can What is Taken Be Returned?” the artist filled an aquarium with water and rocks from Roaring Brook. Highlighting how our very existence changes the world around us, Mowinski included a folded letterpress card adjacent to the tank:

“In 2023, I dipped into water every day from the summer solstice until the

autumn equinox, typically in a swimming hole on private property along the Roaring Brook in South Williamstown. These rocks are from that spot. Roaring Brook feeds into the Green River, the north branch of the Hoosic River, a tributary of the Hudson River.

Can what is taken be returned?

I invite you to dip your hand into this tank of water that holds Roaring Brook water and rocks. Take one of the rocks with you. But only if you promise to return the rock to the Roaring Brook.

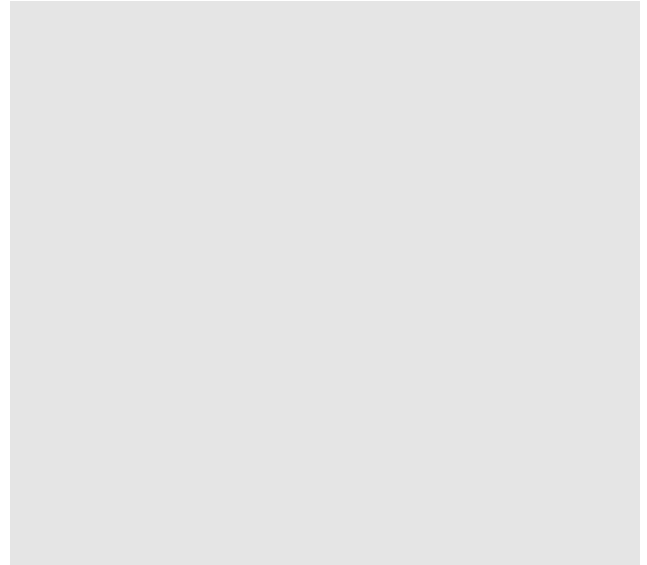
And while that rock is in your possession:

Consider what you have taken from this watershed. Consider what you have put into this watershed, knowingly and unknowingly. Consider how your impact may not line up with your intentions.”

Gregory Scheckler presents four drawings from his “Timespans” series. Scheckler is concerned with time and its kin, movement and light. His mixed media drawings include materials that will change over time, such as silverpoint, a notoriously difficult but ethereal way to make a drawing with a simple piece of silver. He also uses mica, iron meteorite, graphite and other natural materials that can sometimes mimic artificial materials like glitter. So, yes, these drawings do shimmer in the light. They are reminiscent of time lapse photos of birds whose flight creates patterns across the vast expanse of sky. Scheckler titled these works “Timepieces” followed by further descriptive language. They all offer a rather delicate vision of the passing of time and the patterns that emerge across seasons. Scheckler is also a fine and performing arts professor at MCLA and, in addition to his drawings, does use photographic processes for some of his other works.

New Hampshire-based artist Joan Hanley's oil paintings on wood and ink drawings on paper greet visitors upon entry. Her “Sumi Swimmers” are cut out in an outline of the figure, liberated from the rectilinear confines of the page. She installed these along the wall and in the second window space. Hanley's ink handling lends a watery feel to the figures, keeping the warm feeling of summertime freedom alive for just a bit longer.

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