

[Chicago Magazine Article - Wetlands Elegy \(Full Version\)](#)

Joanne Aono has hope for Chicago's wetlands

The visual artist and organic farmer discusses her solo exhibition *Wetlands Elegy* — which kicks off with *Wild Things*, seed-portraits of bygone flora and fauna that once called Pullman/the Calumet Region home
BYLINE: Malvika Jolly

The Pullman neighborhood has a well-documented soft spot for historic preservation and restoration — a tendency which usually sets the town's historic groundbreaking in the 1880s as its benchmark. The nation's first planned 'company town' built to house industrialist George Pullman's factory workers, Pullman's much-celebrated architectural style is courtesy of the traincar mogul's architect Solon Spencer Beman, who is responsible for the historic neighborhood's wide tree-lined boulevards, elaborate Queen Anne and Gothic Revival style buildings, iconic clock tower, and block after block of picturesque row-houses — each constructed from bricks made from clay dredged from the loamy banks of Lake Calumet mere blocks away.

Joanne Aono has a much earlier moment in mind. Her solo exhibition, *Wetlands Elegy* (on view at Mosnart as part of the Terrain Biennial through November 17) is a lament for the lost terrain of the Pullman neighborhood and the broader Calumet Region prior to human and industrial interventions of Beman, Pullman, and company. The site where the former factory town now sits was once part of the Calumet Region's vast coastal wetlands of marsh and prairie — a biodiversity hotspot which fell subject to massive land conversion projects during the Second Industrial Revolution — leaving behind a patchwork of stripped marshes which have suffered significant losses in biodiversity caused by habitat destruction in the century since. Additional stressors like the introduction of invasive species and altered environmental conditions due to climate change have only worsened the situation, causing a seismic increase in extinct and endangered animal and plant populations.

Wetlands Elegy kicked off earlier this month with *Wild Things*, Aono's outdoor installation of seed-portraits honoring the extinct local species that once called the Calumet Region home. These intricately arranged seed mosaics rely on sparse elements — bird-seed, hand labor, painted text — and then time, wildlife, and the elements to feast on the artworks. As the seeds disperse, the images will disappear. *Wild Things* works via a quiet mechanism of gradual removal or slow erosion not dissimilar from the logic that guides Felix Gonzalez-Torres' candy pieces at the Art Institute, softly revealing the banality of extinction. But there is also a contradiction at the core of *Wild Things* which leans towards optimism: if you see the image has disappeared — "[mirroring]" as Aono says, "the extinction process," — it is a testament to the presence of wild things yet, and with them the possible hope for the restoration of Chicago's wetlands.

In advance of the opening reception for *Wetlands Elegy*, we spoke with Aono about the ten-acre farm she runs with her husband in North Central Illinois, the ethics of land use in our time of climate precarity, and her observations as a farmer.

What motivated you to become a farmer?

Part of my husband's and my feeling about life in general is you should do what you can to live what you believe in. My artwork and farm-work coincide in that they're both labor intensive — and you never know what's going to happen. We also use as little fossil fuel as possible so we farm using draft mules — Loretta and Emmy-Lou, two beautiful mules who are sisters weighing 1600 pounds each — who pull the equipment with us and help us to farm. Ten percent of what we grow goes to the local food bank. We also believe in living with nature, and because of that we are farm organically and don't use synthetic herbicides or pesticides, and we are also trying to build habitat for animals to live with us — so we don't shoo away the deer when they're eating the vegetables, because they belong here.

We called it Bray Grove Farm: "bray" because that's the sound a mule makes and "grove" because we have so many trees here. Out here in "big ag" farmland, they are constantly chopping down trees to clear more

agricultural space — the trees would cause too much shade to fall on their crops — but because we have so many, in the wintertime when the rest of the land is barren, our land has plantlife, and so all of the animals tend to come because there's something to eat.

We wanted to recover the land and build more natural habitats for other animals — everything from the mice to the deer to the raccoons to the birds to vultures and crows, which are considered pesky animals and which have [almost] disappeared — that's part of my interest in *Wetlands Elegy*. Where Pullman sits used to be the wet prairie, then the whole Calumet region was drained and filled in for industry and to build the Pullman [company town]. The whole installation revolves around the former Pullman neighborhood, what it used to be and what it could be. I'm thinking about how the natural environment was destroyed for development and industry.

Can you tell me about the seed pieces?

The next seed piece I am going to be putting down outside is *Thismia americana*, an extinct plant species that was only found in the wetlands surrounding Lake Calumet, in the Pullman area. It was discovered by a female PhD candidate, Norma Pfeiffer, in 1912 and then went extinct four years later [the land it was found on was extensively altered by industrial development during those years]. It's this tiny, little plant the size of a marble. It had no leaves or anything.

The seeds are washed away by nature or removed by animals, piece by piece, revealing a quote by conservationist Aldo Leopold from his book advocating for a "land ethic," *A Sand County Almanac*. The piece works via extinction; having the image disappear mirrors the extinction process. I will periodically return and put in new pieces.

The seed pieces are relatively new since being on the farm. Another project, *Home Fields*, started a few years ago as we were choosing and planting seeds for the farm and I began reading more and more into the origins of [non-native] seeds and plants. It was about immigration into the United States and immigrant populations like my grandparents [who emigrated from Japan], who planted vegetable seeds native to their birthplace to grow what they wanted to eat. I wanted to plant what I could to observe the stages of growth of each plant — and to witness it.

What I would have loved to have done for *Wild Things* — but which is not legally permissible — is to have collected seeds from the local wetlands area. I spent a lot of time wandering around Indian Ridge Marsh, taking pictures and making notes. But for the seeds that I used, some — like the corn — is from my farm. The rest were chosen for color or texture or because there are certain seeds I know the birds of the area will like eating — Red Milo, Black Oil Sunflower, and Safflower seeds.

What else do you grow on Bray Grove Farm?

We specialize in unusual produce. This can encompass everything from heirloom variety eggplants to daikon greens and radish pods, as well as esoteric salad greens. We also grow varieties of edible and medicinal plants and flowers, like chamomile and yarrow. One native example that's quite delicious is juneberry, a small tree that produces sweet red berries in early summer, and which was growing here when all the land was tallgrass prairie before European settlers arrived.

Part of our interest is how food and plants have such unique cultural meanings to different groups throughout the United States. Because of my background, we grow a lot of Japanese vegetables; we grow a squash called Kuri in Japanese — there's no word for it in English as far as I know but the French call it Potimarron. We also grow a German fennel that's called Grosfruchtiger and this year we grew a Tulsi [an Indian basil] which is sometimes referred to as holy basil — which are some of our favorites. In the past, we've grown heirloom corn varieties like Wapsie Valley, which is from Iowa, and Reid's which is local to Illinois, which are referred to as being 'landrace' — local cultivars that have been improved by traditional agricultural methods over generations of seeds — we hand-grind both into cornmeal and polenta.

What other works will be displayed as part of Wetlands Elegy?

I drew endangered birds on the window glass of the transom of the building — which is where the gallery gets its name, “Mosnart” is “transom” backwards. The placement is a combination of the bird illustrations on the [surface of the] glass playing with the reflections of the sky and trees. It acts as a segue to the inside of the gallery. The drawings on display inside are based on endangered wetlands species and are made with metalpoint, which is a very old process in which you use little metal pins to draw on a specially-treated surface. It creates a ghostlike appearance which [felt appropriate for] a series on extinct and endangered species. There’s a very muted palate in the pieces I’ve made for this exhibition — I don’t want anything to scream.

I like the immediacy of drawing; the process becomes emotional to me. if I do a silverpoint panel I like to build up the surface of the paper so there is a texture to it, because when the stylus hits the surface, I feel it. And while I'm thinking about what I'm drawing, I'm also feeling the texture — the resistance — of the surface. I sometimes use two implements in one hand at the same time; I hold them like hashi, or Japanese chopsticks. A lot of my past work is about duality, whether the dualities of being a twin or the dualities of immigration. It's a way of using two instruments at once [which are] going against each other

Why an elegy?

Pullman is already built up and the big industry that killed off and polluted everything has already done its job. Thinking about how much cannot be fixed with all the contamination [and habitat alteration], they did massive studies and they determined that they can’t remove or remediate the contamination, so they’ve just capped it off and are putting a layer on top and trying to grow on that. A lot of things about the wetlands are gone forever — that I see as a fatal end. That’s why I think it’s an elegy. But there are a lot of organizations that, along with the Park District, are trying to restore the marshland all the same. We are recognizing how important this region was to migration routes and everything else, how it’s a key area for extinct but also endangered species. So with any mourning, you have hope.

The opening reception for Wetlands Elegy is on October 26, 2019 from 5 to 8pm at Mosnart.
DETAILS: Pullman. Mosnart. 5 p.m. Free. tallskinny.com/mosnart