

Women in Photography – Lay of the Land

Exhibition Dates: October 15th – November 24th 2020

**starts*

Is there a relationship between women and the land? English poet John Donne thought so. "O my America! My new-found-land/ My kingdom, safest when with one man mann'd," he wrote in his poem To His Mistress Going to Bed, neatly conflating the colonisation of the New World with his possession of a woman. Written some time between 1593 and 1596, his poem voices a particular perspective – that of the privileged, white, Western man, master of all he surveyed. This perspective was to remain an authority for the next 400+ years but now, 20 years into the 21st century, that authority is being challenged. The metoo movement and a new wave of feminism is insisting that women's stories count; global warming and the sixth mass extinction are demonstrating that ransacking the Earth for resources leads to disaster.

It's against this backdrop that Women in Photography – Lay of the Land is taking place, an exhibition of work by 12 women artists who have used photo-media to consider the environment. Their choice of medium is interesting because photography has an uncomfortable association with the drive for possession, too often used to map out new territories or objectify female subjects. Here that association is turned upside down. Rather than 'taking' photographs, with the sense of extraction the word implies, these artists 'make' work, using alternative approaches that slow down the creative process and push the medium, creating images that honour both the natural world and their individual relationships with it. Many of the works on show literally include more than one perspective, taking the form of diptychs, triptychs or collages; collaborations also run through the exhibition, a polyphony of voices in which other cultures, family members, and even nature itself have been invited to contribute. The artists consider the long history and future of our planet, climate change, and human fragility; they also reference their own homes, or sense of displacement, or now-lost family land.

In putting the exhibition together, Informality Gallery and co-curator and artist Virginia Woods-Jack were inspired by the idea of "Mother Nature", a personification that asserts the power of women and the natural world, and also opens the possibility of dialogue. Rather than conceiving of the planet as a passive resource there for the mapping, taking, or mastering, "Mother Nature" suggests our environment is a living entity with its own rights and needs, an entity which may influence human experience as well

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as be influenced by it. Proposing that nature has an intrinsic value in and of itself, not just an instrumental value in terms of how we can use it, this argument has been popular in conservation since the 1970s, and has featured prominently in significant international declarations such as the Earth Charter International 2000. It's also an argument that predates the modern Western conception of things, and exists alongside it elsewhere.

As with women's rights, the struggle continues, so it's interesting – perhaps only natural – to see that it's women who have taken up the theme with this work. And "Lay of the Land" is a good name for a show putting them together, because while this phrase can refer to the features or characteristics of an area, it also carries a metaphorical sense of the current situation or way things are organised. Women in Photography - Lay of the Land invites you to consider our perception of the world, and alternative ways of seeing.

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Diane Smyth, October 2020