

*All has been consecrated.
The creatures of the forest know this,
the earth does, the seas do, the clouds know
as does a heart full of love.
Strange a priest would rob us of this
knowledge
and empower himself
with the ability
to make holy what
already was.*

-Saint Catherine of Siena

Desecrated: A Feminist Perspective on our Environmental Crisis

My work explores the human experience of nature, specifically in a society where we move with unprecedented quickness through life and give little heed to the physical and spiritual necessity of a relationship with the natural world. Much of my work articulates a sense of loss and void in both our lack of relationship with the environment and in the earth itself where resources, species, and landscapes are disappearing rapidly. The beauty and harshness we find in the natural world, frequently side by side, become a catalyst for us to ponder the questions and mysteries that arise from life and from ourselves. As author Jerry Dennis writes in his *Windward Shore*, “[w]hen we look frankly at ourselves we know that we are made of the same stuff as orioles and oak trees, lightning bolts and beach stones, and that any separation is an illusion. We are in nature, and of it, and it is absurd to think that we are ever above, below, or outside it” (38). Using this notion, I explore the idea that the human psyche is intrinsically linked to a connection to the natural world through a feminist perspective as I see many connections between the diminishing concept of the female in the divine and the exploitation and degradation of our environment.

Our imbalance with our environment has dire consequences for all ecosystems and elements of the Earth. In his book *The Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv addresses the issue of our disengagement with the natural world as Nature-Deficit Disorder (NDD). He gives the disclaimer that “[t]his term is by no means a medical diagnosis, but it does offer a way to think about the

problem and the possibilities” (36). Louv describes NDD as “the human cost of alienation from nature” and the effects as “diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illness” (36). He outlines how and why we have become so disconnected from nature and how it affects the human psyche, specifically in children. He points out that “most children today are hard-pressed to develop a sense of wonder... while playing video games or trapped inside a house because of fear of crime” (96). Louv’s argument is that we can attribute many of the modern problems we have in our society—ADHD, depression, crime—to not spending time outside and connecting with our natural home.

In addition to its toll on the human psyche, our disconnection with the natural world has led to our current global warming crisis. The contemporary leisure of relying on grocery stores for food has led us to forget we depend on the health of the earth for survival. Due to carbon emissions from industry and daily life, the temperature of the earth is steadily rising, wreaking havoc on ecosystems and species, climates and crops. The polar ice caps and glaciers are melting at an unprecedented rate: ice that has been frozen from a time before humans even existed is now dissolving away into the sea, making sea levels rise. Weather systems now referred to as “superstorms” have caused unexpected damage; wildfires rage in the American west because of drought; hurricanes flood Manhattan, leaving America’s largest city without electricity for months; and extraordinarily warm winters leave the Midwest with 100% losses on fruit crops. Scientists estimate that the world’s food production will go down by as much as 2% every decade for the rest of this century (Gillis).

To provide my own perspective on our present environmental crisis, I look to the past to try to discover key elements in our history that have allowed us to dominate nature rather than live in balance with it. What qualities of our culture permitted us to disregard our place in nature and think

we were above and outside of it and thus to degrade it as we have? I see how religious morality, specifically the values of Christianity, has shaped the structure of the Western world. As a woman who was brought up Catholic, I often struggle with the lack of a balance of gender characteristics found in the Christian concept of the divine. The Christian God is wholly male, the Father and the Son (the Holy Spirit is depicted as a gender neutral flame or dove), and there is no counterbalancing female equivalent. Even Mary, the mother of the Jesus, is not seen as divine but rather as a Saint, a human of exceptional holiness. This notion has influenced Western culture's collective history, and traditionally "female" qualities like intuition and sensibility are inferior to the traditionally "masculine" qualities of rationality, progression, and domination leading to centuries of vehement misogyny.

From a certain perspective, the oppression of the feminine can directly relate to the oppression of the environment. Before the dawn of Christianity, most cultures had a balance of both masculine and feminine characteristics in their concept of the divine. In fact, in his *The Great Mother*, Erich Neumann points out that the idea of the Goddess came before a male deity, saying "this fits in with the secondary character of the male godhead, who appeared only later in the history of religions and derived his divine rank from his mother, the Goddess" (74). The feminine aspects of ancient religions tended to be in balance with the cyclical nature of life on earth, as the female's cycles of menstruation and pregnancy were directly related to the cycle of the moon and agricultural seasons.

With the onset of Christianity, which furthered Judaism's concept of a male-only god by worshipping both the Father and the Son, not only was the feminine divine eliminated, but there was a clear campaign by the male hierarchy of the Church against women in general. Relying on

Genesis' creation myth protagonist Eve, the early Church Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries “were responsible for creating the image of woman as temptress, for they fled the world with its temptations and led a life of extreme asceticism in the desert” (Grössinger 1). Where once the female cycle was considered a connection between earthly life and the divine, the Christian Church saw women as “imperfect men with an excess of humidity in their bodies which made them damp and thus limp and unsteady, always changing like the moon. That was why women had to be watched over by men, protected, guarded, let, as the power of rational thinking was by nature stronger in men” (Grössinger 4). By oppressing the feminine, the Church suppressed the connections between women and nature, and thus nature itself fell to the wayside.

In his foreword for *The Myth of the Goddess*, Sir Laurens Van Der Post points out the Western-influenced destruction this history of misogyny has caused modern civilization, saying:

There is no dimension of history of which this is more true than the way the feminine half of the human spirit has been dealt with by masculine-dominated societies, and inadequately acknowledged and evolved in our cultures and civilizations. We see the result of this neglect, which is with us still, in the decay of the feeling and the caring values of life and in the pursuit of the masculine rationalism which seems to be the dominant element in the establishments of today (qtd. in Baring and Cashford)

As feminine sensibility and intuition, qualities that require a knowledge and contact with one's surrounding natural environment, were pushed aside to make way for masculine reason and intellect, the importance of a relationship and balance with the natural world fell way for economic progress and profit. As Anne Baring and Jules Cashford point out in their *Myth of the Goddess: An Evolution of Image*:

The last 2,000 and even 4,000 have seen the demise of the feminine principle just as they have seen the increasing mastery of nature. This process seems

both inevitable and, in broad outline, lawful, but from this historical moment, when the earth is progressively being laid waste by those who depend on it for their life, it also seems to have gone too far (554).

In its quest for domination, masculinity overlooked and oppressed both women and the environment, stifling the need human need for both.

One artist that I have looked to for his ability to capture the mysterious depth of the natural world while maintaining environmentally sustainable practices is Andy Goldsworthy. For some of his better-known pieces, Goldsworthy makes work both in and of the outdoor environment, using only natural materials oftentimes found nearby. Ice, leaves, dirt, twigs, slate, stone- all of these are resources Goldsworthy transforms into art. Because of the nature of the materials and the placement of the work, many of Goldsworthy's pieces are ephemeral, living only as long as the natural elements permit them. To document his work, Goldsworthy photographs these pieces from conception to death. His work invokes the viewer to meditate on the natural process of life, death, and all stages in between.

The pieces of Goldsworthy's that I am most interested in are his series of *Holes*. Made from a variety of materials, these pieces evoke a sense of mystery and passage as the viewer gazes into the abyss found in the ground, on a tree, or in a stone. Speaking about these pieces, Goldsworthy says:

I've come to see it as a kind of entrance, a visual entrance into the earth, into the tree, into the stone. That entrance between which life both ebbs and flows. Looking into a black hole I've often described is like looking over a cliff edge. There's this sense of being drawn into the black as you're drawn into the depth, the distance.

While the blackness of the hole depicts void and absence, it also creates the opportunity for the viewer to fill it with her own meaning, simultaneously allowing for a deep sense of presence as well.

As Goldsworthy's *Holes* lose their form to the elements of the natural world, the materials slip back into the cycle of the earth, further bolstering his environmental standpoint, the cyclical nature of life, and the ephemerality of existence.

Another movement in art that has influenced the way I approach my own work is the Feminist movement of the '60s and '70s. What I find most compelling about this movement is the emphasis on the choice of materials that relate to and bolster the idea of femininity. Eva Hesse turned to fabric, strings, and ribbons for pieces like *Area and Contingent*, calling to mind the rich history of women and textile work. Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document*, which records the first months after the birth of her child, utilizes diaper smears on paper as an abstract record of her son's life. Hannah Wilke used gum to sculpt scars in her *Scarification Series*, a material that has been chewed up and spit out, referencing the way women have been treated throughout history. These carefully chosen materials of the early Feminist artists tie directly in to both the overarching history of women and the more personal life of an individual woman. Materials such as fabric, which throughout history was always categorized in the realm of "craft," and diapers, whose containment of bodily fluids was seen as dirty, were elevated into fine art, sending a clear message that materials generally seen in the "feminine" sphere were every bit as significant and valuable as their "masculine" counterparts.

In order to approach the work for *Desecrated*, my final thesis exhibition, in both an environmental and feminist way, I also start with a careful selection of materials in order to maintain a sense of integrity to my idea. For *Indigo Hole*, I sew together small strips of linen in a gradient of indigo hues to create the illusion of a hole. The use of fabric inherently evokes a sense of the feminine as textiles have always been in the domestic sphere of women. Linen specifically was used

for swaddling newborn babies and shrouding the bodies of the dead before burial, roles that were and still are traditionally left to women. In this sense, linen represents the cycle of life from birth to death and in doing so relates to an individual woman's own cycle, both mortal and menstrual. After hand-dyeing large pieces of linen in a natural indigo dye vat (an environmentally friendly way of gaining infinite shades of blue), I violently tear down the linen into small, individual strips. The strips, with all their frays and tatters, are then layered out in concentric and overlapping circles, beginning at the center with the lightest hues and fanning out to the edges in the deepest shades of indigo. These strips are then stitched together and to a sheet of crinoline for extra support. Crinoline is a screen-like fabric used in the mid-1800s through early 1900s as a means to give women's skirts more "puff," teaming up with the corset and high heels to intensify the immobility of women in the higher classes. It also contributed to the decoration and objectification of women through fashion, as the women in these voluminous dresses could easily be compared to pastries and confections, light airy things that could not be bothered with critical thought and decision making. In this sense, the structure that the crinoline offers *Indigo Hole* also ties into the history of fabrics and women.

The blue results of indigo dyeing correspond fittingly with the human psyche's need for a spiritual relationship with the environment as well as feminism. Blue is a color associated with "eternity, the beyond, supernatural beauty, religious transcendence, the spiritual and mental" (Ronnberg and Martin 650). Goethe wrote that "...a blue surface seems to recede from us... it draws us after it" (qtd. in Ronnberg and Martin 650). Just like looking into deep, inky black blue of a bottomless body of water or the infinite night sky, *Indigo Hole* beckons the viewer to lose herself in its depths of blue.

In addition, the color blue, which apart from the sea and the sky is the rarest color found in the natural world, has also traditionally been used to represent the female divine. The Virgin Mary, for example, is often depicted with this color: “blue is the color of Mary’s celestial cloak; she is the earth covered by the blue tent of the sky” (Ronnberg and Martin 650). Blue has been associated with femininity because of its link to the night sky and the sea. Women were associated with the night sky because of their natural connection with the cycles of the moon and with the sea because of the waters of life contained in their wombs. Many of the Great Mother goddesses “are born from the primeval ocean or the watery abyss, the primordial womb of life from which all creation emerges” (Baring and Cashford 557). Sumerian goddess Nammu was of the sea; Isis was born from “all wetness”; Hathor is “the watery abyss of heaven”; Nut (the Egyptian goddess of the sky) lets her milk fall as rain; and of course, as Botticelli immortalized in his *Birth of Venus*, the Roman goddess of love was born of sea foam and emerged from a clam shell (Baring and Cashford 557).

Again with an emphasis on materials and processes, other pieces for my thesis exhibition include monotypes of hollowed eggshells inked up, filled with dry pigment, run through a press, and chiné colléd onto a back sheet of paper. Oftentimes, the dried pigments, which include charcoal powder and metallic pigment, burst out of the shell under the pressure from the press and explode out in spontaneous direction, emphasizing the damaging nature of the process. The idea to use eggshells came from the symbolism behind these paradoxically strong and fragile objects. In addition to representing the obvious female fertility and reproduction, eggs occur in many creation myths where “the universe is hatched from an egg, which has everything within itself and is needful only of brooding” (von Franz qtd. in Prentice 265). Filling the eggs with charcoal powder and gold and silver pigments is an intentional way to load the eggs with a substance that relates to death and

destruction as well as to a material referencing the divine and value. The printmaking process becomes a meaningful way to utterly crush the shell and its contents into an abstraction beyond recognition, much like the way mankind has treated both the environment and women throughout history. In this sense, the press well represents the evils of industry, mass production, and mechanized manufacturing, both in relationship to the human psyche, the feminine, and the environment.

I continue with the use of eggshells in my *Salt Shell* pieces. To create this work, I begin by cracking the egg and discarding the yolk and whites. The shell is then filled to the brim with salt water made from black lava salt and a dash of dry gold pigment. Over time, the water evaporates, leaving the shell crusted over in salt crystals. These pieces seek to evoke ideas of equilibrium and moderation, and the destruction that results from excess and imbalance. Both the egg and the salt have dual-natures: similar to the paradoxical nature of an eggshell which is both strong and fragile, salt is a mineral capable of healing and preserving as well as burning and corroding. The final manifestation of this process with these materials is similar to a three-dimensional hole, tying into *Indigo Hole* and the *Shell Series* with overlapping themes of void, emptiness and desecration.

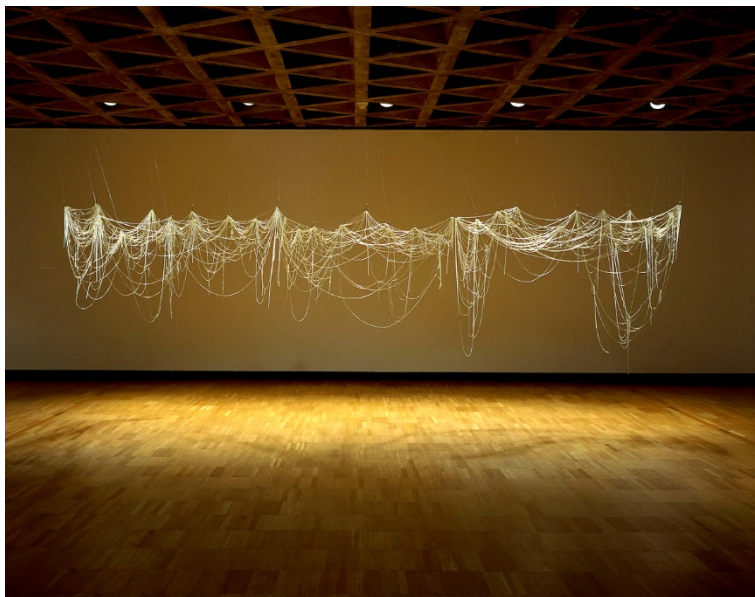
For the last installment of my thesis exhibition, I dyed broken eggshells a deep, bluish black color and piled them in the center of the room. Dyeing eggs relates back to the tradition surrounding one of Christianity's most important holy days: Easter. While Christians celebrate Easter as the day Jesus rose from the dead, its timing coincides with the pagan celebration of the goddess Eostre, the spring equinox, and the renewal of life. This shift in this religious celebration is a perfect example of the Western male-dominated culture stamping out any instance of feminine divinity. In our contemporary culture, whole hard-boiled eggs are traditionally dyed pastel colors to

celebrate Easter, symbolic of new life and hope. Thus, dyeing the broken eggshells black represents loss, death, and sorrow.

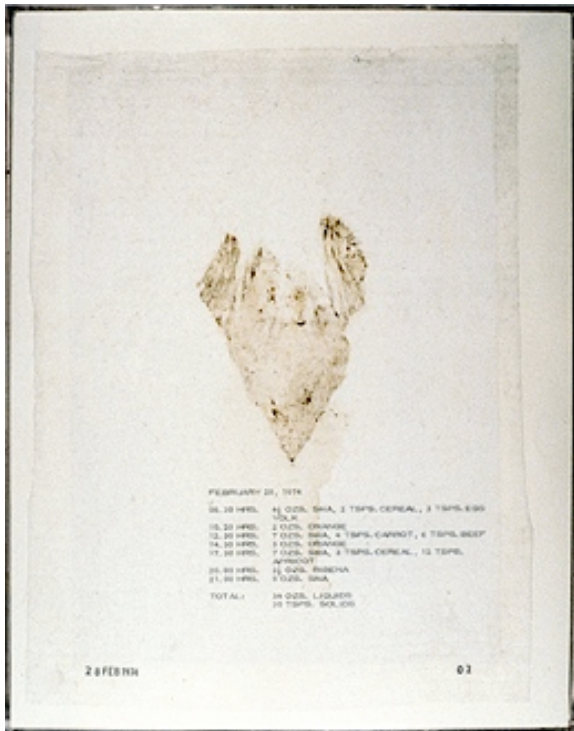
All of these pieces, *Indigo Hole*, the salted eggshells, the *Shell* print series, and the pile of black eggs, are connected in the significance of their materials and processes and their representation of loss, void, and the desecration of the feminine divine and the natural world. They look to the past to understand how we have gotten to the current environmental crisis, and what shifts and changes in spirituality and philosophy have brought us to this point in our history. Where once both femininity and the natural world had an important place in humanity and the human notion of the divine, Christianity gave way to a masculine-only God and a long history of misogyny, leaving the feminine and the environment as victims of the “masculine” ideas of rationalism, genius, and progress. My hope for *Desecrated* is to allow viewers to meditate on this loss, gaze into the void, and be reminded of the spiritual power of the natural world.



Goldsworthy's *Hole* pieces



Eva Hesse's use of string



Mary Kelly's *Post Partum* Document













shell pieces of

shells





Shell sand #4

London





CM - 10101 1010

10101





Small specimen # 4

Enchanted





shell series 2 8

Robert





rose, white H 9

Robert









11-11-11

11-11-11



