

Alter E(c)o

by

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Alter E(c)o

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Abstract

Alter E(c)o is a series of three large-scale sculptures that represent a futuristic, fictional, dystopic landscape. Each individual piece mimics land formations observed in the natural world. The use of synthetic and industrial materials is intended to be a bizarre depiction of telluric matter in millions of years to come. Through size and material, these fictional edifices are meant to allude to the fact that we are ultimately the creators of our existence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	2
II. FORMAL DESCRIPTIONS	3
a. Water	3
b. Vegetation	4
c. Earthly Accretions	7
III. INFLUENCES & INSPIRATION.....	9
IV. PROCESSES & MATERIALS.....	11
V. CHALLENGES & DISCOVERIES.....	14
VI. FUTURE DIRECTIONS.....	17
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	19

Alter E(c)o

Marissa Shell



Alter E(c)o (Installation View)

2018

Mixed Media

Sizes Variable

These machines were trapped under the wreckage before the freezing. Therefore, these robots are originals. They knew living people. -A.I. Artificial Intelligence

I. INTRODUCTION

Our reign over our environment has become apparent in several ways. Oil extraction, deforestation, monoculture, and mass urbanization are just a few examples of how humans have manifested control over nature. Along with these practices and processes, come consequences and effects that disrupt terrestrial processes and ecologies that have evolved and become established over hundreds of millions of years. These consequences are evident in Earth's loss of biodiversity, our warming atmosphere, diminishing coastal barriers, and the accumulation of synthetic matter in landfills and oceans to name a few. Although it is not unnatural for Earth to slowly evolve and change over time, the rate at which it is happening is not due to gradual or evolutionary processes. This rapid change can be viewed as a result of global anthropogenic activity, and our partaking in the *tragedy of the commons*¹.

Through my sculptures, I have created speculative landscapes that recall the ones that we are familiar with now. They are meant to create a sense of wonder for the viewer- much like a real landscape would- but are also intended to look ostensibly artificial. These fictional edifices are my depiction of what a futuristic, dystopic world might look like if humankind eventually became extinct due to the exploitive nature as a species.

¹ *The Tragedy of the Commons* is a term used in social science to describe a situation where individual members of a community try to benefit the most from a source of shared resources.

II: FORMAL DESCRIPTION

Water

As you walk into the gallery, you encounter several light blue, knee high, organic forms that resemble icebergs or waves. Each form is horizontally striped, made by means of stacking and gluing layers of material. They rest on top of, or beside glossy black or blue puddle shaped bases or platforms that are reminiscent of melting ice or oil slicks. Some of the spikey forms sit on very thin sheets of black vinyl placed directly on the floor. Others are elevated four to six inches off the floor by means of precariously stacked, one to two inch high modular platforms, in order to create negative spaces underneath them. Scattered about each form and puddle cluster are organic shaped Plexiglass chips which emulate shattered ice. The chips are stacked neatly in one to two inch piles, are randomly scattered, placed flat on the floor to create tessellation patterns, while others lean up against their parent form.

Drift, is conspicuously meant to allude to water. Each synonymously leaning sculpture is created to look like pointy icebergs or waves, directly referencing our warming oceans and our diminishing glaciers. The spikey forms seemingly melt into their fragmented platform bases which seem to be shifting. The shiny black vinyl is meant to conjure up the event of an oil spill, and the additional use of clear, frosty vinyl further alludes to water, but is also meant remind us of the pervasive presence of plastic in the ocean. Shattered Plexiglass chips mimic broken shards of ice, just as glaciers are breaking apart and causing our oceans to rise. *Drift's* sprawled out orientation, allows viewers to walk through each puddle cluster, and reiterates the vastness of the ocean.



Drift (detail)
2018
Mixed Media
Approximately 2' x 20' x 20'

Vegetation

Bialowieza Monument stands approximately 62” tall, 80” wide, and 48” deep. Its round, tall shape is situated in the middle of the gallery space and acts as the centerpiece of all three sculptures in the entire body of work. Its green color and vertical orientation is suggestive of plants and vegetation. An organic shaped, asymmetrical ring made from Astroturf surrounds the base of the sculpture. Random patches of wiry, rubbery protrusions that resemble weeds emerge from the grass. Pieces of cheesecloth, and wood and cardboard chips are added over the duration of the exhibition. Suggestive of gradual and continuous growth, the chips which appear to be seeping out from under the

Astroturf, is indicative of insidious metastasis over time.

Directly inspired by old growth forests, *Białowieża Monument* serves as an homage to these limited areas of land that have remained undisturbed by humans and other natural events. These forests are characterized by their 100-250 year-old trees which support significant biodiversity and perpetuate unique ecological relationships. The old trees that have died and fallen are able to decay into carbon-rich matter, providing a nutrient substrate for rare fungi and mosses, while other dead trees that remain standing double as nests and shelters to many endangered birds and mammals. Organic mesh bubbles, cellular patterns, soft fabric that is characteristic of moss, and the industrial, linear stems that cover the surfaces of this sculpture, are my attempt to visually emulate the plethora of life that might be found in these enchanted woodlands.

In this piece I have used scale to visually draw the viewer deeper into my imaginary world. As they walk by, intricate details invite them to take a closer look- much like we would watch a colony of ants hard at work, building a bivouac. At first glance, complexities and details are not immediately noticeable. But on careful inspection, niches and minutiae are revealed. Much like a scientist examines biology samples under a microscope, uncovering organismal structures and relationships that help to sustain life in a primeval forest, the viewer is encouraged to make visual connections between the micro and macro patterns that are present throughout the sculpture.



Białowieża Monument
2018
Mixed Media
Approximately 63" x 80" x 48"

Earthy Accretions

Comprised of three red and orange structures, roughly three to five feet tall, *Bear Ears*, serves as a backdrop against the farthest wall of the gallery. Each edifice is spaced far enough away from each other that the viewer can easily walk through, around and between each piece. Its contours and colors are strikingly similar to those found throughout Western geological landscapes located in the United States, such as Bryce Canyon, UT and Arches National Park, UT. Its stacked and layered construction, allude to rock and mineral deposits that build up over long periods of time. Textures created by pushing drywall compound through cotton mesh create a chalky, brittle surface, further reminding us of dry desert lands. Smaller chunks of materials that have also been individually painted and treated with the dry wall texture surround each piece and make each form appear as if they were crumbling apart, or pushing their way up through the ground. In certain areas, the sides of the larger forms have been covered with drips and squiggles of paint that resemble drawings.

Bear Ears's red and orange layers, initially inspired by hoodoos, arches, and slot canyons, refer to sandstone geological formations of Western America. In the process of making these sculptures, the United States administration announced that protected areas in Bears Ears National Monument and Grand Staircase-Escalante in Utah, were to be reduced in size. This reduction of size and loss of federal land protection would leave these areas vulnerable to mining and oil development, threatening the sacred petroglyphs and pictographs carved into and drawn onto the rocks over 2000 years ago.²

² (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/bears-ears-native-american-art-1170164>)



Bear Ears
2018
Mixed Media
Approximately 60" x 132" x 110"

* * * * *

In *Alter E(c)o*, each individual sculpture helps to create a larger, beguiling and illusory world of my own. While all these pieces are meant to evoke a sense of transcendentalism and reverie, just as our oceans, forests, and landscape often do, there is an irony that lies beneath the surface of my painted and adorned forms. Each are made from a material that is one of our environments principal offenders: synthetic foam. These fake and synthetic formations serve as speculative commentary in regards to anthropogenic activity. It questions the future of our planetary existence. Will future geology comprise hybrids and conglomerates of foam and rock?³

³ (Robertson)

III. INFLUENCES AND INSPIRATION

Growing up in a major metropolitan area played a major role in the choices I made for this exhibition. Not having much exposure to nature or much of the American landscape as a child, I was not aware of the magnificence that other parts of the country- or world- had to offer. It was only when I started traveling in my young young adulthood that I was able to witness the clear water beaches of Hawaii and the Philippines, the massive formations of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, and other spectacles that nature had to offer. These experiences have had a profound effect on the way that I perceive the world, which I have attempted to communicate through this body of work.

Additional source material that informed my exhibition, is the of work Teresita Fernández. Her abstract approach to the subject of landscape, and the way she describes the experience of physically perceiving sculpture, are what interest me the most. In an interview, she describes the experience of a person observing a sculpture:

I am not interested in the scientific construct of “perception,” but in the kind of emotional response that a viewer has to a particular set of stimuli. My original interest... was the idea of the ambulatory viewer. That’s what is important about sculpture... There’s a sense of sculpture that, in its most basic form, you understand through moving. ...it’s connected to the eye in a traditional sense of perception, but it’s also connected to... a moving body, a perceiving being, not just a roving eye... Your body moves around something and peels back layers of

*understanding through how you move.*⁴

Both rooted in formalism, it can be argued that there is a connection between Fernandez's idea of the *ambulatory viewer*, and the concept that art can create theatrical effects discussed in Michael Fried's essay, *Art and Objecthood*.⁵ These ideas provide an accurate description of, and a theoretical guideline for making, installation art. I have chosen to explore Fernandez's and Fried's theoretical narratives in my work through creating environmental sculptures that you can walk through. Each mass is mean to be an individual part of a larger whole that makes up an environment and evokes a sense of *theatricality* as you move through the overall installation.



Alter E(c)o (Installation View)
2018
Mixed Media
Sizes Variable

⁴ (https://sculpture.org/documents/scmag13/nov_13/fullfeature.shtml)

⁵ (Fried)

IV. PROCESSES & MATERIALS

Creating an immersive environment allows the viewer to suspend reality, recreating the sense of wonderment that I experience when I am in nature. The scale and the size of the gallery were the initial challenges that I faced with the production of this exhibition. Originally I had envisioned filling the gallery with multiple smaller scale tableaus made from plywood slabs to create my fantastical environment, but this process was too time consuming. To address the size of the gallery, it was imperative that I worked much faster to make larger sculptures.

My solution was to utilize insulation foam to create large masses. It is plentiful and ubiquitous making it very easy to find. The abundance of the material and the ease and speed at which the foam could be cut allowed me to produce larger pieces in a fraction of the time that it took me to cut plywood. Transferring and modifying techniques and processes that I developed while making the smaller prototypes, I was able to quickly adapt to building the larger forms from foam with ease.

Sumptuous, tactile textures and intricate patterns- much like you might find in plants and geological strata- are another visual characteristic I wanted present in my work. In my precursory tableaus, I created rich textures by adhering dyed cheesecloth onto the plywood, laser-engraving tessellation patterns into these surfaces, while charring others with a torch for a velvety ash finish.⁶ In *Alter E(c)o* I modified techniques I had employed in the smaller studies, to create similar and additional micro-textures for the larger forms. Effective approaches to this were to

⁶ *Yakisugi* (referred to in the West as *Shou Sugi Ban*) is an ancient Japanese technique use to waterproof, preserve, and to protect wood from insects.

spray-paint chunks of foam- or fake rubble- which created a rich, pitted and melted surface; exploiting graphic, woven structures of fiber glass mesh and loosely woven cloth, by gently pushing drywall compound through the holes of the fabric; and through fraying and distressing the edges of dyed cheesecloth creating a soft, fluffy edge.

While the large scale forms drew onlookers into the gallery space, the meticulous, surface details provided more visual information, for which they could further process, as they entered the gallery. My *macro formations* and *micro details* set up a contrasting dichotomy, helping to convey the way larger structures are often made up of several smaller systems in nature. The ability to appreciate and discover the work on different scales was a successful effect.

Lighting and color were additional considerations that I responded to. In previous sculptural studies, I had experimented with lighting and shadows, and learned that the closer you light an object and the closer it is to the wall, the sharper and more intense its shadow will be. In this exhibition I chose to illuminate all the sculptures from one side of the gallery, generating as many sharp shadows that I could. These shadows produced an interesting visual effect on the wall and floor and further connected it to the idea of landscape and nature, as it appeared to look as if a sunset were casting its light on each of my forms.

For each sculpture, I chose a palette with hues that referred back to the subject matter of the piece. Limiting combinations to three or four colors- paying close attention to brightness, contrast and intensity- generated sophisticated relationships among each suite. While form

predominately dictated the placement of each vignette, the color juxtaposition of each sculpture next to its neighboring sculpture was something else that was considered.

My unique processes are a reflection of how I see our ecosystem evolving; and my tactile materials are intended to be synonymous with the geology that will divulge the evolutionary story of globalism caused by anthropogenic activity. Much like evolution occurs in nature, my fictitious landscapes and sculptural vignettes are the descendants of smaller, experimental predecessors that evolved into more substantial forms, textures, and other formal components, vital to experiencing my version of an *alternative ecology*.



Bear Ears (Detail)
2018
Mixed Media
Approximately 60" x 132" x 110"

V. CHALLENGES AND DISCOVERIES

My proclivity to use several varieties and kinds of materials and processes helps to facilitate the production of my work. Countless experiments and attempts at using a wide breadth of mediums in the studio, and my willingness to try new ways of working unfamiliar to me, extend the possibilities of what my work can become. This wide range of experimentation allows me to discover different forms and approaches to art making.

In Charles Darwin's, *On the Origins of Species*, he posits that species evolve over generations by means of natural selection, whereby they adapt to their environment to better thrive and reproduce.⁷ Darwin was able to draw this conclusion based on discoveries made from his extensive scientific experiments and observations of the natural world. In the studio, I liken my artistic approaches to scientific laboratory methods and the process of successful selection. Much like a scientist would carry out experiments in a lab, my trials with materials and techniques yield results, and visual effects that are evident in my work, and are only included by means of a process of selection from a variety of experiments.

Technical difficulties that I encountered for this exhibition were ineffective color palettes, achieving the proper scale and addressing the way my sculptures interacted with the floor. Choosing a palette for *Drift*, was more challenging than I had initially thought it would be. It took me several attempts to find a color combination that was successful at communicating the visual essence of ice layers as well the essence of an ocean. To discern what I thought the palette should be, I printed several images of glaciers and icebergs. Initially, I had combined several blues I had on hand in the studio, and despite their *blueness*, they still did not accurately recall

⁷ (Darwin)

the image that I envisioned in my mind. Upon further investigation of my reference material, I realized that I needed to specifically use white paint with a tint of sea foam blue, along with thin bands of contrasting black and saturated turquoise, in order to achieve the visual intensity that I sought.

One of the greatest struggles that I faced, was the way my sculptures interacted with the floor. As I completed each sculpture, they sat in my studio, and while they looked like art, they still very much seemed like *objects*. In this exhibition it was important that the work feel as if they were sculptural elements, that made up a larger environment. With not very much time left, I had no choice but to quickly make decisions in order to get the sculptures to interact with the floor more fluidly so they would look less static. Deciding to add foam *rubble* chunks to *Bear Ears*, continuously adding material suggestive of growth to *Białowieża Monument* throughout the duration of the exhibition, and using a modular building approach for *Drift*, were three choices that I resolved contemporaneously during the installation. Informed by research and preparation I had done in previous works, these choices were relatively successful, making each work look less like an object and more like an installation.

Playful, yet orderly, experimentation is a critical part of my studio practice. Often times there are several failures and unsuccessful attempts to resolve a piece that occur. Being able to problem-solve, and to swiftly work through failures and attempts to make informed decisions, enabled me to more effectively install this exhibition; and helped me develop patterns and techniques in the studio that eventually coalesced into visually and conceptually cohesive characteristics of the work.



Białowieża Monument (Installation Detail)
2018
Mixed Media
Approximately 63" x 80" x 48"

VI. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

With more time, there are many ways I could expand this body of work. In *Białowieża Monument*, the verticality of the main form, green colors, and organic patterns, successfully allude to vegetation, plants and forests. To expand this piece, I would make several taller, more slender and columnar clusters, using multiples and modular units much like I used in *Drift*. Multiple vertical elements would resemble the several tree trunks that we find in a forest, and would further create an enclosed environment that we also associate with woods. For the surrounding bases of these vertical structures, I would use a variety of fiber glass mesh on the floor, along with more Astroturf, aluminum mesh bubbles, and cheesecloth, further varying the sizes, shapes, textures, and surfaces of the bases. I would revisit and attempt to more successfully emphasize the seeping, leaking effects I was able to achieve using the wood chips and cloth underneath the Astroturf. By adding the work over the duration of the exhibition, and documenting this with a series of time lapse photography, I would further allude to the altering anthropogenic effects on the environment.

To expand *Bear Ears*, I would make more land-like formations, and extend their placement horizontally along a wide wall. Widening the physical span of this piece would further insinuate their characteristic as a landscape, and would allow me to exaggerate the lighting, casting fuller, more distinct shadows. Another opportunity that this piece presents is the possibility of creating a cavernous space with forms that extended downward towards the viewer from the ceiling like stalactites you might find in caves.

Out of all three sculpture, the forms I was able to create in *Drift*, were the most refined. By slicing the thickness of my material in half on an angle, I was able to create layers that could tip and tilt making them appear more varied. To further develop this piece, I would make more clusters of forms, and would vary the sizes of the spikes and waves, which would create more sophisticated relationships in regards to scale. Other ways in which I would expand this piece are through creating different surface coverings and heights for the puddle shapes. Using reflective silver or white would further allude to water and allow the viewer to see themselves in the reflection, insinuating that our decisions and actions often are projected onto our environment.

As a departure from this body of work, I would like to further investigate the possibilities and effects of smaller, intimate spaces. In, *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard explains that our perception of the physical world is formed from the experience of intimacy that we develop in *the home*, and anthropomorphizes physical structures found in a house (corners, drawers, attics, basements). He draws conceptual parallels between a house and the human psyche, and considers the differences between our ideas of *the home* and animal shelters.⁸ An in-depth analysis of Bachelard's text would give me an opportunity to visually interpret his chapters on shells, nests, and corners, and would serve as a conceptual reference for future sculptures.

⁸ (Bachelard)

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