



Hera Büyüktaşçıyan. Photography by Berk Kir



Alexandra McIntosh. Photography by Alexander Ferko

# HERA BÜYÜKTAŞCIYAN AND ALEXANDRA MCINTOSH

Ahead of Hera Büyüktaşçıyan's exhibition *Defending Ancient Waters* at the **Centre de Création Contemporain Olivier Debré** (opens 29 March), to where it travels from CIAPV, the artist and curator discuss her investigation of the layers of unseen elements in artificially transformed landscapes.

**Alexandra McIntosh:** I first came across your work at the Toronto Biennial in 2019. Your installation *Reveries of an Underground Forest* (2019) drew on the history of the land and its boreal forests before the arrival of European settlers. For me, it was a work that was very rooted locally, but also addressed more universal questions about how landscapes bear witness to history – in this case, waves of migration, settlement and displacement – as well as to our transfiguration of natural environments over the course of centuries.

When I came to Centre International d'Art et du Paysage in Vassivière (CIAPV) in 2021, you were one of the first artists I wanted to work with. My hope was to extend an invitation to you to examine the context of this specific place – an island in the middle of an artificial lake created in the 1950s following the construction of a hydroelectric dam – and the surrounding region of dense forests that were planted for lumber in the early 20th century. By all appearances it is a site that seems natural, idyllic, even wild in some parts, but which has been shaped entirely by human hands.





Hera Büyüктаşçıyan: *Defending Ancient Waters*. 2023. Installation view of *Resonant Grounds* at Centre International d'Art et du Paysage, Vassivière Island, 2023. Photography © Aurélien Mole. Image courtesy of the artist

**Your interest in revealing invisible histories, in looking at what is lost and what is gained through our actions, for me resonates with the modification of landscapes and how we might address it.**

Hera Büyüктаşçıyan: I felt that there was an interesting and indirect link or a sense of kinship, even, between *Reveries of an Underground Forest* in the Toronto Biennial and what Vassivière Island, and the region in the wider sense, have unfolded. In both cases we see forms of erasure, being uprooted and the way transformation of the landscape takes place on the foundations of what existed before. In one of them, the forest lands and trees that once were inhabited by their original dwellers disappear to function as a foundational element of a new settlement; on the other side, we see the planting of trees to establish forests, changing the course of the landscape by concealing old traces and forming a new environment and ecosystem. This not only recalls the uncanniness of the ground we base our roots upon, but also addresses the continuous cycle of destruction and recreation, erasure and rewriting.

This cycle also reveals certain dynamics of power and hierarchies that shape the world around us and our relationship to nature, as well as how we perceive, witness and read our presence – be it within environmental, personal or social spheres – and the histories that are embedded within. Even though we are all familiar with these dynamics, living within an artificially formed landscape makes one able to witness these cycles more

consciously. I suppose being in Vassivière enabled me to experience and grasp the divisions of the seen and the unseen, or certain contrasts that propose different understandings of the internal and external.

**You came to Vassivière for a residency in autumn 2023 and then developed the exhibition *Resonant Grounds*, which is soon travelling from CIAPV to the Centre de Création Contemporain Olivier Debré (CCC OD) under the title *Defending Ancient Waters*. Among the elements you investigate within these altered landscapes, water is very present in the exhibition.**

I am often fascinated by water bodies and architecture and try to look at how they form landscapes, social and urban realms, and histories shaped around them and their impact on the morphology of any form and matter. Water is an element whose nature contains many dualities. In the exhibition we explore not only its transformative power as a physical entity but also its nature to divide and unite, conceal, reveal, dissolve and condense, destroy yet heal and draw and erase. For instance, one of the primary departure points of the show was that of dams in the region having the major role of reshaping the current identity of the landscape, creating not only an environmental, social and economic wave that shook a lot of roots but also a base for a new ecosystem to emerge, through nature and wildlife taking over the territory.





Hera Büyüктаşçıyan. *Dendrologia*. 2023. Installation view of *Resonant Grounds* at Centre International d'Art et du Paysage, Vassivière Island, 2023. Photography © Aurélien Mole. Image courtesy of the artist

**From what you say, I get the sense of water as a kind of independent entity that possesses agency above and beyond human actions, a life force with both destructive and creative properties. In your installation *Defending Ancient Waters* (2023), cascading fabric flows through the exhibition space as if pouring in through the windows. Here, water is exceeding our control, frustrating our attempts to contain it and underscoring the fact that it is an elemental force that surpasses us.**

Exactly. This also resonates with the power of the unexpected that shakes one's foundations as well as the course of things shaped through this sudden yet continuous flow, flooding the space. The unprecedented movement or flow that often appears in my works, particularly the site-specific ones, associates with the reappearance of something that was forgotten or unseen, like a reactivation of time and its sunken remnants

that resurrect with a gestural movement, like a tidal advance. Coming back to the piece, another unexpected element comes when these cascading fabrics flow through the arched windows, appearing as a group of particles or debris, resurfacing and forming a constellation of traces. These came into life out of fragments of wood and bark from decomposed trees that I collected on my daily walks around the shoreline of the island. I began to form geometric compositions out of these fragments, derived from the outlines of the foundations of hamlets and settlements engulfed in the construction of the hydroelectric dam yet still lying beneath the surface of the lake.

**You have also addressed the spiritual associations of water and its healing capacities, as well as questions of purification and metamorphosis, all of which are very present in the exhibition.**





Hera Büyüktaşçıyan. *A Rehearsal for Changing Skin*. 2023. Installation view of *Resonant Grounds* at Centre International d'Art et du Paysage, Vassivière Island, 2023. Photography © Aurélien Mole. Image courtesy of the artist

Before my residency began, while researching the Limousin region, one of the things that caught my attention was its name: the Plateau de Millevaches, meaning the Land of a Thousand Springs. From ancient times onwards, the plateau was known to be rich and verdant with its rivers, streams and springs, some of which have been thought to hold curative powers from prehistoric times until today. One such spring that I visited was framed by a wooden structure where piles of garments and other textiles have been tied as offerings or instruments that could both heal and act as an anchor for those in need of healing. You could observe the transformation of the material reality of these suspended fabrics due to the influence of water and the humidity of the forest. There was a sense of timelessness to these fragments, which stood as agents of bodies and their departed limbs. Seeing this structure in its full glory influenced me a lot, as I witnessed how the physicality of material changes and assumes a new nature and identity over the course of time. The structure accommodating the fabric resembled a threshold or passageway for changing one's own skin and taking on a new one... a point of departure or sacrifice, which also nurtures the world of surfaces and perishable bodies.

***A Rehearsal for Changing Skin* (2023) recalls the wooden structure hung with fabric. Felt and geotextiles are draped in layers, evoking topographic surfaces or geological strata as well as the skin of an organism. The choice of fabric was significant, was it not?**

Yes, it was indeed! The encounter with this spring and the forms that

emerged through the suspended fabrics altogether raised a lot of thoughts, not only on the body, permanence, recovery and illness but also about the idea of sacrifice, which directly reminded me of various surfaces like skin and fleece. Among the various materials I had been experimenting with during the residency, felt and geotextiles seemed the most significant in terms of their relationship to the fleece of sheep whose presence in the region has diminished over the course of time due to the disappearance of moorland and the industrialisation taking over the region. Interestingly, water again plays a role in forming the surface of felt. It is also linked with agriculture, in the case of the geotextiles that are often used for retaining water in the soil and act as a dividing element, forming a protective barrier for plants from parasites as well as assembling a micro-terrestrial surface. Both have enabled me to explore the transformative nature of the material as well as the notion of skin as a division between interiority and exteriority that accumulates traces of time and the agency of absent bodies. In *A Rehearsal for Changing Skin*, all these in-between states reveal themselves in an ensemble of surfaces that appear as piled-in layers that incorporate linear and amorphic marks engraved by burning. They resemble an accumulation of suspended limbs or shells.

**On this question of absent bodies, it's not just the sheep that have diminished but also the pastoral practices associated with them - ways in which humans are connected to the landscape and to other living beings within it. Similarly, wolves were driven away through**





Hera Büyüktaşçıyan. *Reveries of an Underground Forest*. 2019. Installation view at 259 Lake Shore Blvd-E, Toronto Biennale of Art, 2019. Photography by Toni Hafkenscheid. Image courtesy of the artist.

### human actions. Could you tell me more about the drawing series *Wolves and Sheep* (2023)?

Before my residency began I had an interest in understanding how wolves have disappeared in time, as well as in their representations in oral histories and folktales. While ancestral and ancient knowledge propose a totally different way of embracing nature and its creations, the image of the wolf in the so-called modern world is often associated with fear – a life-threatening entity that appears in the dark and is often the unwanted greedy one that brings violence. To me these representations reflect both how human nature not only manipulates the dynamics of the environment but also the way in which history is written, how social systems are directed and how power dynamics operate even within folktales.

So, I began to work on a series of frottage drawings, exploring who exists within whom or who is swallowed by whom, through contrasting forms that are angular, oblique, constructed and organic. Frottage is a technique that I often revisit, as it imbibes both transparency and full bodies of marks and traces that coexist and create a sense of depth through the varying intensities of rubbing graphite over the surface of paper – which is a sort of surface tension to me. A piece of fleece from a sheep, and the surface of tree bark or paper cut-outs that suggest more architectural elements such as dams, combine to form a kind of palimpsest where elements are seen as if through a layer of fog. Over time the images began to resemble pieces of limbs, parts of an organism or a decomposed architectural fragment, all of which are interwoven and incorporate internal and external states, as well

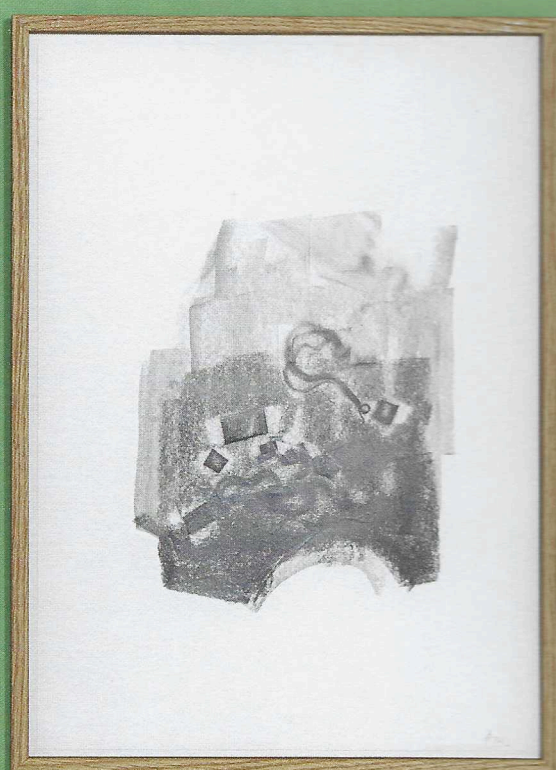
as the coexistence of what is seen within the unseen. They are in an uncanny dialogue with the felt sculptures, as if the drawings stand as their X-ray – unfolding what lies in the depths of all these surfaces.

**The installation *Dendrologia* (2023) features suspended pieces of bark collected in the forest from fallen or diseased trees. These “discarded skins”, as you have described them, have a kind of mask-like quality to them. You have also spoken of having a sense of kinship with them.**

During my walks I began to collect these unattended pieces that appeared as anthropomorphic forms or portraits of beings departed from their bodies but which still carried their inner voices. After every excursion, I brought a couple of these portraits back to the studio with me. In time they began to consist of a togetherness, which started to feel as if they were spontaneously vocalising with a collective strength, containing a sense of resistance yet still portraying a departure. Due to the impact of the fall, or the internal curves and veins of the tree, they all had holes or broken parts that resembled a mouth or an organ where the wind could pass through and which would allow them to whistle or make any abstract sound via the passage of breath. So I began to envision them as a constellation, or rather as a choir that reclaims its absent bodies through the presence of sound.

**There is a form of embodiment, then, of giving voice to these trees and all they have witnessed. This piece has a significant and quite moving sound component.**





Hera Büyüктаşçıyan. *Wolves and Sheep*. 2023. Installation view of *Resonant Grounds* at Centre International d'Art et du Paysage, Vassivière Island, 2023. Photography © Aurélien Mole. Image courtesy of the artist

Sound is something very physical to me. It can create space and embody what is not visibly present. It can recall what is forgotten within the memory, resurfacing instances, landscapes, people etc, as it intrigues senses and creates forms through remembrance. Looking at these mask-like forms, I often envisioned them standing in a choral setting that would evoke all this through collective voice-making. While researching the musical history of the region, I was drawn to choral traditions within ecclesiastical music. I had the privilege to meet and collaborate with Jean-Christophe Gauthier and Ensemble Madrigal, based in Limoges and with whom we worked on a composition derived from the ancient song *Vulnerasti cor meum*, which means "Thou hast wounded my heart". The choir members sang or whispered the words *crine* (hair), *oculorum* (eyes) and *vulnerasti* (wounded) in a polyphony of voices, where each of these words was deconstructed into syllables and their vocalised abstractions, overall giving a feeling of a forest becoming vocal. Within the installation, the tree bark masks are suspended in a semi-circle, heard as if chanting, whispering or murmuring these three words – which felt like they have completed their missing bodies through the presence of sound.

**Sound and music figure more generally within the exhibition, not least in the title *Resonant Grounds*.**

I think many of the works have a sense of musicality. *Defending Ancient Waters* and *A Rehearsal for Changing Skin* both stand as a score made out of lost or absent fragments that are carved, marked and traced through the material and the surface. To me, the frottage

series stands as an echo – considering all the transparent layerings and marks passing through one another, revealing something that is behind a surface, they stand like a resonance... or a group of resonant grounds.

**Thinking too about the idea of musical notation, the nature and purpose of a score is to be interpreted. It has to be read and transformed from one language into another in order to be shared. This resonates once again with your interest in the metamorphosis of landscapes and bodies, as present in the exhibition and your practice as a whole. *Resonant Grounds* itself will undergo a metamorphosis, so to speak, for its subsequent presentation at CCC OD. Could you speak about some of the aspects that will be transformed or reimaged for this iteration of the exhibition?**

Within the second chapter of this journey, I will dive deeper into the idea of the agency of the non-human and reading traces through this agency – as I feel I have learned a lot throughout my journey and process in Vassivière. *The Land of a Thousand Springs* will connect me to one of the wildest and largest rivers in France, the Loire. It will become the main focus of this chapter, in which I would like to question what a river would say if it could begin to speak. So there will be a lot of thinking around the poetics and politics of water, and the weaving of timelines in between.

*Defending Ancient Waters* runs until 5 January 2025