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Ecolonial Holism

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Fig. 1. Louisa Keyser, Basketry Vessel, 1900. Willow, bracken fern, red bud, 8 x 10 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. Brooklyn Museum by exchange, 72.5.2. Creative Commons-BY; Photography courtesy Brooklyn Museum

Midway through the exhibition *Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment*, a vast ecocritical survey of American art history organized by the Princeton University Art Museum, visitors come upon an Indigenous model of the “whole earth.”¹ Wa She Shu (Washoe) artist Louisa Keyser (?–1925) wove the globular basket around 1900 from sturdy, tightly coiled willow stems punctuated by delicate, stacked bundles of arrow-like shoots in mud-dyed bracken fern and red bud (fig. 1). Her luminous rows and airy columns contrast with the slashed gullies, torn roots, and smeared iron tailings on the denuded hillside of a nearby painting by Homer Dodge Martin, *The Iron Mine, Port Henry, New York* (1862; fig 2). One of many episodes featuring Native American artwork throughout *Nature’s Nation*, the juxtaposition seems to invite a clear-cut moral comparison: the basket, an embodiment of reciprocal relationships between people and plants; the painting, a representation of human violence against the living earth.² The vessel appears to float like a golden planet through a damaged history of art and land.

Keyser’s was a hard-won holism. Her weaving materials were sourced from equally barren hillsides around Carson City, Nevada, as mine shafts and cattle ranches curtailed the abundance of Wa She Shu territory in the wake of the Comstock Lode boom of 1859.³ Her people were forcibly resettled and sought wage labor to avoid starvation. Keyser invented the *degikup*, a spherical basket with integrated patterns that expand and contract with the coils, while working in the household of Amy and Abe Cohn. The patrons ridiculed her appearance and personality, invented myths about her designs, and controlled the sale of her textiles in exchange for food, clothing, shelter, and medical care.⁴ While the Cohns held that the *degikup* transmitted a precolonial state of nature, I see an adaptive form that manifested the dynamism of Wa She Shu technologies amid crisis. Painstaking practices of

tending, harvesting, soaking, splitting, and coiling roots and stems transformed diminished biotic communities into precarious new wholes. From the organic wreckage of colonialism—the systematic uprooting of people and plants—Keyser rewove what was torn apart. Her innovation entailed reshaping Indigenous ecological relations to the ungrounding of the Americas. Confounding any simple contrast, the vessel in *Nature’s Nation* embedded and responded to the same extractive processes underway in Martin’s scene.



Fig. 2. Installation view, *Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment*, Princeton University Art Museum, Fall 2018; Photography by Emile Askey

I have begun to think of certain works of art that hold inharmonious histories together as a form of ecolonial holism. The seemingly paradoxical phrase indicates that an enduring disposition toward Native cultures as earth-sensitive alternatives to the damaging ideologies and practices of Euro-American industrial modernity is inadequate to the challenges of complex crises. “Ecolonial” recognizes the extent to which ecological processes are bound to the “ongoing, cyclical colonialism” described by Kyle Powys Whyte, in which the containment of Indigenous people compounds the damage wrought by extractive industries by limiting their capacity to adapt with the land.⁵ The modifier positions the divisive dynamics intrinsic to the colonial as an irreducible component of the dense relationality implied by the ecological. The subject meanwhile centers the creation of new unities that incorporate and deform the dominant patterns of withdrawal and control. I seek a language of holism that grasps the arrangement of violent and reciprocal relationships between Indigenous, settler, and other-than-human communities as a frictious web, not a traditional dualism.

Thinking with this conjunction has numerous methodological implications; I will suggest only two in the little remaining space. First, in lieu of the episodic recollection of Indigenous knowledge systems by concerned communities amid flashpoints in environmental politics, we may proceed from the recognition that there is no ecology without Indigeneity. Native people and their arts have participated in mutually transformative interchanges not only with material environments but with the development of the natural sciences in Europe and

the Americas, as some scholars have shown.⁶ It follows that all ecocritical studies of American art necessarily build on the transcultural foundations of ecological thought. Second, beyond asking how culturally specific environmental knowledge informs Indigenous artwork, we may inquire into how certain objects remake ecological relations under siege, occasioning dynamic and adaptable techniques of survival. Less self-contained than it first appears, Keyser’s traveling degikup is a translator among the violent displacements of Indian Removal, the longing of Americans for wholeness, and the branching discourse of ecology, then and now. In rebalancing discordant relations and stimulating new growth, the vessel strikes me as extraordinary—but not otherworldly.

Notes

¹ This references satellite images of the planet that galvanized public consciousness of environmental holism in the 1960s, but I see the longing for wholeness that motivated collectors of Native American baskets at the turn of the twentieth century as a precedent. Note that after reviewing a draft checklist, I suggested the inclusion of a basket by Keyser and several other Indigenous works of art and sources in an email to Karl Kusserow on July 10, 2017.

² The object label and nearby wall text in the Princeton installation historicized this disposition in the “Indian craze” and related nature/culture dualisms of the long nineteenth century. Note that the basket was moved in the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) installation, and the object label was rewritten, in the context of the addition of numerous Indigenous works of art from the PEM collection. Rachael Z. DeLue reads the painting as a complex negotiation with industrial interventions and raises issues with the title and date in “Homer Dodge Martin’s Landscape in Reverse,” in Karl Kusserow and Alan C. Braddock, eds., *Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment* (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2018), 290–303.

³ “Wa She Shu: ‘The Washoe People’ Past and Present,” Manataka American Indian Council, <https://www.manataka.org/page1070.html>; see also Jo Ann Nevers, *Wa She Shu: A Washoe Tribal History* (Reno: Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada, 1976). Keyser likely relied upon other Wa She Shu women to harvest and deliver her weaving materials, due to health issues. Marvin Cohodas, “Louisa Keyser and the Cohns: Mythmaking and Basket Making in the American West,” in Janet Catherine Berlo, ed., *The Early Years of Native American Art History: The Politics of Scholarship and Collecting* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 102–3.

⁴ Cohodas, “Louisa Keyser and the Cohns,” 92–93.

⁵ Kyle Powys Whyte, “Is it Colonial Déjà vu? Indigenous Peoples and Climate Injustice,” in Joni Adamson and Michel Davis, eds., *Humanities for the Environment: Integrating Knowledge, Forging New Constellations of Practice* (London: Routledge, 2016), 94.

⁶ For example, Joni Adamson examined the shared roots of Indigenous studies and ecocriticism in *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001); Laura Dassow Walls traced how the encounters of German geographer Alexander von Humboldt with Indigenous groups in the Amazon influenced the development of the natural sciences in *The Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).