

JANET CULBERTSON

THE TOXIC WILDERNESS

By Joyce Beckenstein

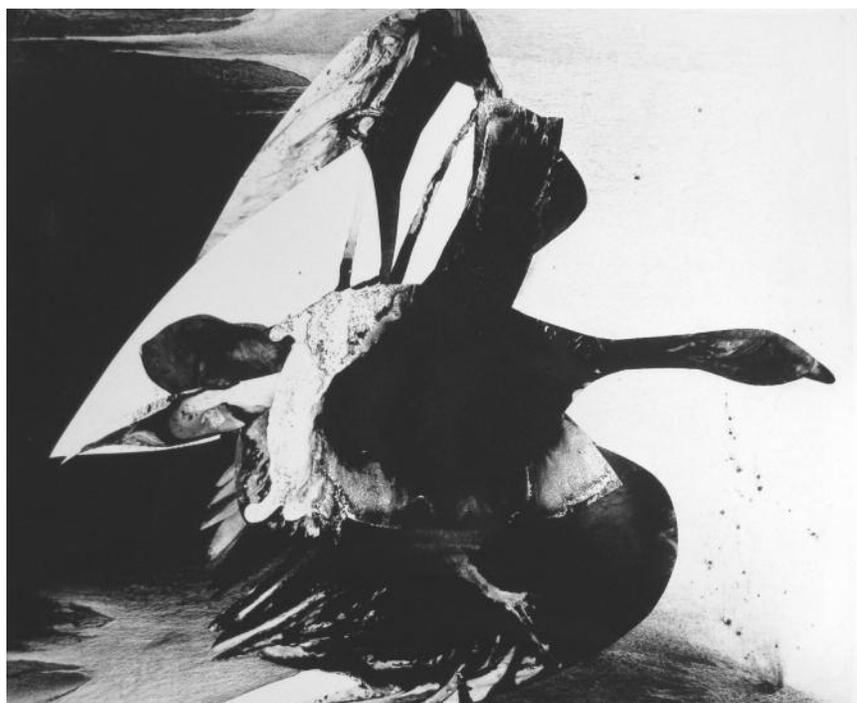


Fig. 1. Janet Culbertson, *Oil Shrouded Bird* (1962) (from *Elegy to Nature* Series), drawing on rag, mixed media, acrylic, 22" x 28". Photo: Douglas Kaften.

To commemorate the Bicentennial, *Art in America* dedicated its January–February 1976 edition to the history of the American landscape. A number of articles in that issue described the genre, from paintings of the Hudson River School to photographs along Route 66 and beyond, as caught in the crosshairs of wilderness and progress. But America, in a partying mood in 1976, was dancing on the tip of a dangerously toxic wasteland. Few artists or art critics back then fully grasped the profound ecological issues confronting the nation on its two-hundredth birthday. Janet Culbertson was among those who did.

So did some environmentalists and scientists. In 1962, Rachel Carson blew the whistle on chemical companies that were polluting and upsetting the balance of nature. Her momentous book, *The Silent Spring*, put a global face on environmental sabotage and the price we would pay for it. In 1964, Clarence Morris, a law professor at the University of

Pennsylvania advocating for nature's legal rights, suggested anti-pollution measures to curb the human impact on the environment.¹ Finally, Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson made it a political issue that resulted in the 1970 National Environmental Protection Act and the designation of April 22 as Earth Day. Culbertson saw these signs of environmental Armageddon as a call to arms.

Long before the mass media began to regale us with relentless images of rivers bubbling chemical sludge and vistas blurred by noxious soot, Culbertson was creating works that re-imagined the American landscape as an uninhabitable wilderness.

Janet Culbertson (b. 1932) grew up in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. She loved nature, canoed through the Allegheny Mountains, and raised baby owls and released them into the wild. Even as a child, she had a visceral response to vexing details: something was wrong with that pumpkin-orange stripe snaking from strip mines through the rivers where she fished. She was saddened by the glazed eye of a freshly killed stag jubilantly carried home from the hunt. These sights haunted her. The result,

she says: "My sister and I became fanatical environmentalists; my brother became a coal salesman."² A feminist who rejected as role models 1950s *Saturday Evening Post* "cover girls" wearing crisp aprons and beaming over hot apple pie, Culbertson received a BFA from Carnegie-Mellon University in 1953. Then, like many young artists, she headed for New York and lived in a cramped Greenwich Village apartment that doubled as her studio. She earned her living as a graphic artist and taught at Pace College. In 1964 she received an MA in art education from New York University.

"Oil Slick is Shroud for Birds," headlined a 1962 *Washington Post* column that pointed a finger at oil companies dumping oil waste into the sea. This warning, an eerie precursor to the 1989 Exxon Valdez tanker episode and the more recent BP disaster, which both wiped out huge swaths of American coastal life and livelihoods, inspired Culbertson's first eco-series, *Elegy to Nature*. Begun in 1962, these unsettling drawings, including *Oil*

Shrouded Bird (Fig. 1) depict what are now ubiquitous media sightings of strangulated wildlife. They were barely noticed and blandly reviewed when they were exhibited in New York (1967) and Los Angeles (1969).³ Says Culbertson, "Everyone missed the point completely. Detractors made fun of environmentalists, calling us 'tree-huggers, bird watchers and bleeding hearts.'"

Soon after completing *Elegy to Nature*, she took a course at The Foundation for Mind Research, which introduced her to Joseph Campbell's monomyth, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1948), a tale of a hero who goes on a quest, overcomes torments, then returns enlightened, with something to share. Culbertson wondered about this archetypal male role model on a testosterone-fueled odyssey. What about women, *their struggles, their journeys?*

Her *Mythmaker* suite of drawings (1973-76) charts the course of a heroine who, as a tiny speck, struggles along a delicate thread in an anthropomorphic universe, its deserts and mountains defined by crevices and folds simulating the primeval cleavages of Mother Earth. These works are well documented by Jenni L. Schlossman in her 1992 article, "Janet Culbertson, Political Landscapes," in which she characterizes one drawing, *Inbound* (1975; Fig. 2), as a "symbol of a woman's struggle to follow her own path through the maze of seemingly insurmountable hurdles presented by male-dominated society."⁴

In 1976, Culbertson left for the Galapagos Islands, a copy of Herman Melville's *The Encantadas* (*Enchanted Islands*) tucked in her backpack. Her later billboard paintings depicting fields of toxic, pulverized ash were clearly inspired by Melville's descriptions of the islands that "know not autumn, and they know not spring; while already reduced to the lees of fire, ruin itself can work little more upon them."⁵ But Melville was not a naturalist. He found the Galapagos tortoises grotesque and relished the way sailors poached them for dinner then gulped the broth in soup bowls made from their shells.

Culbertson describes them: "marching through our campsite, their girth crashing our flimsy tents, fearless because they were protected. One stole my heart and took center stage in my work for several years." She began a series of drawings of the island's creatures (1976; Fig. 3), rendering them on eight-foot mural paper using a burst-ink process to mimic the gritty terrain of a volcanic island. The figures are first sketched in charcoal; white spaces are masked with tape and the surface is sprayed with India ink. The paper is then immersed in water. After it dries, the tape is peeled off and the image is completed in pastel. Culbertson's tortoises are heroic in size and scale; her



Fig. 2. Janet Culbertson, *Inbound* (1975), ink and charcoal, 40" x 30". Collection National Museum of Women in the Arts. Photo: Douglas Kaften.

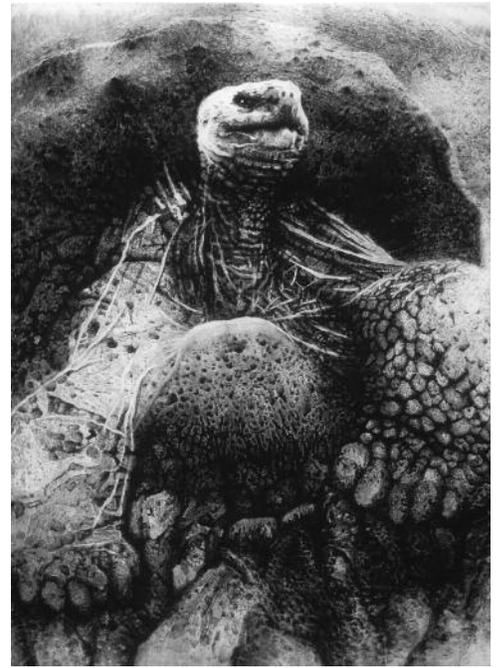


Fig. 3. Janet Culbertson, *Galapagos Tortoise* (1976), ink and charcoal on rag, 96" x 72". Photo: Douglas Kaften.

iguanas are piled high in configurations that look a bit like Escher's positive and negative animal shapes. She squeezes them tight within the margins of her drawing pages to imply their confined exile to a sullen place where, under the careful eye of preservationists, they may be spared extinction.

How little it takes to upset nature's fragile balance. Culbertson takes as her theme degradation and dignity: hailstorms of volcanic spittle battering noble tortoises as they trudge through rocky terrain; global warming frying the forest where a baboon, depicted in *Occupant* (2000), struggles to survive.

Lerner-Heller Gallery, New York, exhibited the Galapagos drawings in 1977, along with landscapes, including *Devil's Crown* (1976; Fig. 4), a massive chunk of rock overpowering a thin slab of volcanic island. A first glance triggers an art historical memory of Frederic Edwin Church's monumental *Iceberg* (1859), an enormous ice monolith standing against a chilly grey sky, surrounded by an undulating blue sea. But Culbertson's speckled boulder rises on the equator, not the Arctic Circle. What appear to be glittering splatters of ice turn out on close viewing to be dollops of blue-footed booby dung. An opaque Milk-of-Magnesia sea merging with a dull blue sky envelops this megalith. Where Church gives us nature sublime, Culbertson gives us nature subjugated.

Lerner-Heller Gallery stopped representing Culbertson soon after this exhibition because, says the artist, "My monomyths were 'too feminist' and my Galapagos works were too big and unframable for the gallery to sell." But some critics understood them. In 1977, Mary Vaughan, writing for *Arts*, insightfully summed up the exhibition: "Janet Culbertson's personal icons are inter-faced with ecological concerns. In the



Fig. 4. Janet Culbertson, *Devils Crown* (1976), acrylic on canvas, 34" x 48". Private Collection. Photo: Douglas Kaften.

paintings, the illusion of the live, beautiful part is ... thwarted by its whole, its environment, a prediction of nature's destruction"⁶ Beyond such occasional praise, Culbertson's encouragement came from the ranks of protest movements that at that time linked animal and nature rights to a growing number of activist movements whose causes included the Vietnam War, civil rights, feminism and gay rights.

During the 1970s she joined the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and became known as an eco-feminist. In 1980 she wrote to Lucy Lippard, asking her to consider an ecology issue for *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*. Lippard, who had been thinking along the same lines, culled an editorial collective that included Ana Mendieta, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Michelle Stuart, Christy Rupp Florence Falk, and Culbertson for a 1981 volume, sub-titled *Earth Keeping/Earth Shaking*. The collective editorial statement reads: "If ever there was an area in which the personal and the political merged, this was it. What can women do about the disastrous direction the world is taking?" (They dedicated the issue to two eco-feminists who stood up to corporate America and made a difference: Rachel Carson and Karen Silkwood, the young woman activist who in 1974 exposed the chemical company, Kerr-McGee, for unleashing lethal levels of plutonium in their factories and into the environment. Silkwood died in a suspicious car accident as she was on her way to turn over to the *New York Times* the damning information she had gathered.⁸) Culbertson, in her article, "Ecotage," was also determined to expose polluters. She wrote about guerilla tactics by groups of activists who applied stickers to corporate billboards, reading 'BOYCOTT: This company is a polluter,' actions that soon after inspired her signature billboard paintings.

A number of artists were, by the early 1970s, already documenting the changing American landscape: shopping malls and uninspired tract housing all stitched together by blacktop thruways into the readymade quilt of middle America. Most were photographers, such as William Eggleston, excited by the first images of Earth taken from outer space. In 1967, The National Aeronautics and Space

Administration released these pictures, and Vickie Goldberg wrote, "Suddenly, because of the photograph, we had a whole new perspective of our planet—as a small oasis adrift in the universe, fragile and precious, poignantly beautiful but agonizingly lonely."⁹

But few artists—painters or photographers—were focused on the cancer gorging itself on the Earth's core. Culbertson understood that the problem went deeper than tasteless architectural eyesores besotting suburban communities. She wanted her art to warn that human folly in the name of progress was profoundly damaging life on the planet. She didn't dance around her subject, and for many critics and gallerists (such as Lerner-Heller) her early messages may have seemed too direct, too confrontational, better left to print or TV. This attitude may in part explain why Culbertson's voice remained unheard.

But there is more to it. While human intrusion on the landscape has long been a subject for American landscape artists, most of them, from the Hudson River School onward, gave trespassers a sighing pass through the painted forest. The attitude towards the American wild has always been an idiosyncratic mix of dread and greed. The wilderness was a thorn in the Yankee's entrepreneurial side. Roderick Frazier Nash suggests why in his book, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967). He discusses the roots of European fear of the wilderness and how it encouraged the rationale for stripping away nature in the name of progress. He notes that early mythology painted a nightmarish existence of wilderness, and that folk traditions of many countries associated wilderness with the supernatural and the monstrous. Eden was a garden, nurtured by humans, and early Christians judged their work to be successful when they had cleared away the wild forests where the pagans held their rites.¹⁰ Centuries later, when Puritans sought the New World's wilderness as a persecution-free haven, they assumed it to be their God-given mission to "make an island of spiritual light in the surrounding darkness...to redeem nature from its wilderness state."¹¹

Not until the early nineteenth century, when European Romantics sought to flee the corruption of "civilized cities," was this pit of darkness redefined as divine creation, a sublime sanctuary revered by Transcendental poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Cullen Bryant. A new sensibility now arose: A chunk of the human soul is lost when wilderness is torn asunder. Transcendental writers influenced the artists of the Hudson River School, who, in documenting the sublime in nature that they had fled Europe to find, were now looking directly at human encroachment on newly hallowed ground. They lamented this, but they did not, could not, wholly turn their backs on what they also perceived to be the workings of Yankee resourcefulness. Besides, the American wilderness stretched endlessly—hope lingered that humankind would not go too far. This ambivalence and how it evolved in American art was on the minds of art historians as they wrote on the occasion of the Bicentennial for the 1976 *Art in America* landscape edition.

"As Thoreau meditates on his use of the axe to make himself a dwelling place in nature, he also mourns lost trees, which he misses like human beings," wrote Barbara Novak in "The

Double-Edged Axe.”¹² She characterizes Thomas Cole’s *View on the Catskill, Early Autumn* (1837) as an “idealized pastoral rendering.”¹³ Here, trees and lush shrubbery surrounding two female figures yawn towards the distant Catskill Mountains. Six years later, Cole returned to the site and painted *River in the Catskills* (1843), with “evidence of human depredation and a more realistic style.”¹⁴ Trees are now felled, once fecund foliage thinned to scrub, and a man stands by a tree stump eyeing a strip of buildings along the middle ground of the painting. It is as if Cole halted the eye to give the viewer pause, to plead a reconsideration of the march through the heartland of our wilderness.

But “progress” was unstoppable. Novak points to Sanford Gifford’s *Twilight on Hunter Mountain* (1866,) as a “stump motif in an ambiguous image of the forest defeated by man.”¹⁵ His figure stands in the field he has cleared for his cows and the modest home now nestled within the ragged hem of a mountain range. It is a startling statement about the number of trees it took to shelter a family.

A century later, Culbertson points to more unstoppable “progress” in *Clear-Cut* (1971-72; Fig. 5), a painting based on sketches the artist made while visiting the California Redwood Forest. She reports seeing men set up spotlights at night, then cut trees down, as many as they could, before impending legislation put a stop to the carnage. Culbertson presents the stubby remains of amputated redwoods, some clean-shaven across their tops, but most of them jagged, as if some omnipotent force had wrenched them from their trunks. Painted in muted grays and lavenders against a lifeless field of mauves and blues, it clearly shows the handiwork of humanity taking its idea of progress too far.

It is difficult to reconcile Culbertson’s redwood vision with Jed Perl’s 1976 article, “The Vertical Landscape: In the Redwood Forest Dense.” Why, six years after the first Earth Day, on the occasion of the bicentennial, does an art critic assessing the American tradition of landscape painting make only oblique reference to the state of this forest? His focus is instead the proliferation of nineteenth-century redwoods images used as advertisements by a nascent tourist industry. Only parenthetically does he report “nature’s majesty reduced to being wards of the state.”¹⁶

Elizabeth Baker, similarly halting in her concern for environmental impact, discusses land art as the quintessentially male endeavors of Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, and Walter De Maria. These artists, who placed their works in remote sites within the American landscape, created monumental art, but their motives for doing so had little to do with concerns for land preservation. Baker’s essay grants these intrusions on nature yet another art historical pass, saying “none of these three artists’ works is large enough to have any significant impact on ecology; indeed someday these works, in their capacity as art, may have a preservational effect.”¹⁷ This is a sore point for Culbertson, who says she was once rebuffed by Christo when



Fig. 5. Janet Culbertson, *Clear-Cut* (1971-72), oil on canvas, 24" x 42". Photo: Douglas Kaften.

she questioned the efficacy of wrapping land in polypropylene. She has always believed that, in an ecologically endangered environment, anything calling itself land or earth art has some responsibility to prioritize preservation.

Robert Rosenblum was the only essayist contributing to the 1976 volume to mention in his article, “Painting America First,” work by a woman artist. Reviewing a traveling exhibition commissioned by the United States Department of the Interior to “freshly document America,” he pointed to Ellen Lanyon’s acrylic painting *Everglades* (1975), an Audubon-type illustration of a pelican and an alligator, as one example that suggests “styles in America—and American art have barely changed since the 19th century.”¹⁸ He then singled out a few artists such as John Clem Clarke and Sidney Goodman, whose themes, similar to Culbertson’s, reflect the “ecological, technological and esthetic exceptions that locate us more obviously in the 1970s.” He concluded with the plea that, going forward, “the U.S. will give artists the chance to re-examine America and show us what they find.”¹⁹

That is precisely what Culbertson was doing in 1978 as she drove through New Jersey: “I could see the Statue of Liberty beyond an expanse of putrefied earth. It looked like rape.” She made sketches, and then put them away because they were “so dark.” Nor did she think she had a commercial shot as a woman painting ominous landscapes (she was still signing many of her works Jan or with the initial J to avoid gender bias). Then, in 1980, she nearly lost her life in a terrible car accident and for a time could not paint. When she again picked up her brushes it was with new passion and resolve.

Culbertson’s evolving oeuvre re-invents the concept of wilderness in terms of ongoing environmental catastrophe. Her wilderness is a surreal place, a terrifying human creation that is scorched, toxic, airless and impenetrable. She channels this apocalyptic vision through three icons of the modern American landscape: billboards, industrial parks, and highways, landmarks that are recognized visual blights. Imagine driving through a place where everything green is buried beneath concrete and acrid dust. You pass a billboard pitching a destination of verdant forests, where birds sing and



Fig. 6. Janet Culbertson, *Vanishing Gold* (1998), acrylic, pastel, on rag paper, 22" x 30". Collection Hunterdon Museum, Clinton, N.J. Photo: Douglas Kaften.

flowers grow, and you want to head there but it no longer exists. Culbertson evoked this sense of loss in *The First Billboard* (1987; Pl. 8), a painting within a painting that depicts a billboard sunk into rocky ground strewn with manufactured debris. It advertises a vacation spot from better days, where wetlands hug the shore of a dazzling blue river that meanders towards a sun-drenched horizon. But there is no natural dappled light: rather an eerie string of electric fixtures juiced by radiation illuminates this abyss. No cars go by, no noisy kids yell, "Are we there yet?"

"Janet Culbertson's poignant canvases ... give nostalgia pause. Could anyone in the 19th century have imagined how far things would go? Can we imagine the future pictured by Culbertson?" asked Lucy Lippard, who references Culbertson's works in her article "Too Much: The Grand Canyon(s)." ²⁰ In this article, published in 2000, she points out that we experience the wonders of nature—the Grand Canyon in particular—mostly from theme parks, snapshots, or through the scripted perspective of tour guides. ²¹

This is true. We experience nature as a secondary market; pour "natural" orange juice from plastic containers bearing pictures of real oranges, stab at poly-bags to harvest "organic" produce, and immerse ourselves in "virtual" realities provided by movies, TV, and handheld video games. All of this further alienates us from nature and numbs us into believing that the sky is really not falling.

Culbertson's billboards are apt metaphors for this pre-packaged state of mind, something the science community has long recognized. In 1998, when her works were featured in a one person exhibition at the National Academy of Science, Washington D.C., Fredrica Wechsler, Director of Arts in the Academy, wrote, "She shows us a surreal landscape we dread to see, but one that is alarmingly close to the real thing...a

thought provoking experience that surprises with its beauty."²² *Vanishing Gold*, (1998; Fig. 6), among the works in that show, menacingly recalls the orb of sunlight penetrating a ferociously black cloud in Frederic Edwin Church's *Cotopaxi* (1863). But where Church's clearing skies and reflected light promise a bright tomorrow, Culbertson's sunburst precipitates a lava-like flow of chemical pink, mauve, orange and inky indigo liquids that cascade from the billboard into a lifeless sea.

They are the roads we have seen in Culbertson's billboards, skidded off course onto canvases that define another of this artist's series, *Paving America* (begun 1992-present). "Could you run that truck over my canvas?" Culbertson asked a road construction worker when she spotted him driving a road-stripping vehicle down a local street. He was more than helpful. In fact, in aligning the canvas with the trajectory of the striper, he managed to also etch in the tread marks of his Timberlands, immortalizing the performance element of *Paving America I* (1993; Pl. 9), for the first work

of this ongoing cycle.

"From her outpost on Shelter Island, Janet Culbertson has become an environmental bellwether for the erosion of nature, especially as evidenced by the insidious progression of asphalt pavement," noted curator Alicia Longwell when this and other "paving" images were exhibited at the Parrish Art Museum in 2000. ²³ Culbertson repeated the yellow stripe motif in later paintings, including *Paving the Planet* (2002), where it hovers like a neon rainbow above a lifeless aerial map of Earth. Other variations on the theme, such as *Paving America V* (2008), depict skeins of merging and looping highways clogged with cars—some miniature toy models, others suggested by flat slap-dashed brushstrokes—all embedded in congealed asphalt, all going nowhere.

Culbertson's environmental works have been exhibited with increasing frequency, almost in sync with the intensity of global concern surrounding eco-catastrophes. In 2003 The Puffin Foundation Ltd., at the invitation of the Cuban government, placed an open call to artists to submit works for an exhibition titled "Toxic Landscapes: Artists Examine the Environment." Culbertson's *Marching Giants (Black Gold)* (1997; Fig. 7), one of the first paintings in her Industrial Park series, traveled to Cuba—with the artist—as part of that show. Culbertson had started to paint industrial "parks" after seeing chemical refineries and nuclear reactors. These works riff on what Culbertson refers to as "misinformation" on the part of industry whose blatant appropriation of 'park' insults the notion of nature, carefully and lovingly tended. *Marching Giants* depicts an army of electrical towers robotically advancing towards the viewer through a scrub forest of decimated manufacturing debris. Monochromatic hues ranging from silver-blacks to opaque grays are accented by sprays of red and green iridescent glitter—dazzling metallic

waste biting into what is left of purgatory, where everything, with the exception of these steel executioners, has been electrocuted. A more recent Industrial Park painting, the semi-abstract *Wasteland* (2009; Fig. 8), recalls the New Jersey roadside view that launched the billboard series. A road mimicking the river in that earlier work snakes towards a distant string of smoke stacks. They cough red smoke and spew a shower of glittery acid rain upon two small figures that struggle, as did Culbertson's "Mythmakers," along a road that now has no good place to go.

Sometimes Culbertson laces her grim message with dry wit. In *Toxic Garden* (2001; Pl. 10), she poses a baboon like one of Franz Hal's seventeenth century subjects. Pressed flat against the canvas, he leans into the viewer's space, a succession of ominous nuclear reactors looming in the distance. But this is no *Jolly Toper*, rather a Darwinian cousin, a denizen of the wild, staring humanity down with piercing, angry eyes. "See what you have done," he seems to say.

Culbertson's recent works are denser in texture, more abstract, and especially ominous now that we all live in fear of the next Katrina, corporate oil spill, or E. coli in the family salad. In 2008 The Galería Nacional, San José, Costa Rica, honored Culbertson with a one-person show that included a survey of her billboards and industrial parks. Also on exhibit was a large multi-media painting, *Warming 2* (2008). Collaged with iridescent pigments on rag paper, it portrays a view of Earth from space, but not the familiar blue sphere surrounded by animated swirls of clouds beamed to us by NASA satellites. Culbertson instead depicts Earth reduced to a planet where angry red rivers ooze through chunks of rock and acid dust. When all cools we suspect it will disperse into an empty cosmic sea. Culbertson's combinations of sparkly surfaces and deadly places make odd bedfellows of form and content. She knows that what repels compels: biomorphic-shaped globs of oil slicking toward beaches are stimulating to look at; so are wrack lines of debris glistening in the ebbing tide. Visually these contrasts create the tension between idea and medium that artists struggle to create. In commercial photography it leads to a familiar string of eye-stopping images—black veiled vistas of Los Angeles, tin cans and plastic afloat in crystalline waters—with shock value that lasts the flip of a page.

Janet Goleas, curator of the permanent collection for the Islip Art Museum on Long Island, organized Culbertson's most recent solo exhibition "Insights: Janet Culbertson, Future Tense" (2010). She selected mostly abstract works for the show, no less severe in their commentaries about planet Earth than the artist's representational works. They include *Who Killed Cock Robin* (2001) with its tire tread zipping across a flat, crimson field, and *Sunburst* (2009; Pl. 11), an exquisite new abstract crowded with painted chips of silvered wood accented by glittering pools of yellows and green pigment. Goleas commented on the artist's seamless synthesis of animated brilliant surface with the specter of global death: "Her works have an incredible handle on perspective; they suck you in with dazzle and sparkle, then ricochet to get a somber message across. It's quite shocking when you fall into her world."²⁴



Fig. 7. Janet Culbertson, *Marching Giants (Black Gold)* (1997), oil, iridescent pigments on rag paper, 22" x 30". Collection Nassau County Museum. Photo: Douglas Kaften.



Fig. 8. Janet Culbertson, *Wasteland* (2009), oil, iridescent pigments, rag paper, 22" x 30". Photo: Janet Culbertson.

Culbertson, now an artist for almost five decades, confidently goes where her brush, her emotions, and her responses to environmental issues lead her. She's reflective when asked about her shift towards abstraction:

I'm not sure why I became less representational. In the beginning I felt no one was getting "it," so the *First Billboard* is very clear-cut. As an artist you need to do different things to make it more interesting. My style is looser, my eye more critical. I can't pin it down, but I am enjoying the change in process, saying more with less realism, saying more with lush texture.

The multi-media works Culbertson has made since 2008 illustrate the stylistic evolution of an artist immersed in the artistic process but never losing her grip on her environmental mission. Her works continue to be uncannily prescient. The

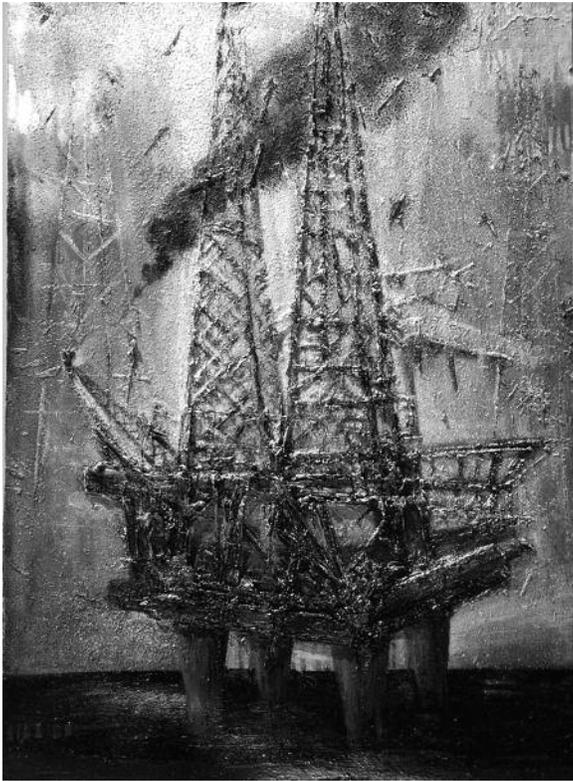


Fig. 9. Janet Culbertson, *Oil Rig* (2008), oil, collage, iridescent pigments, rag paper, 30" x 22". Photo: Janet Culbertson.

orange flame spewing black soot in *Oil Rig* (2008; Fig. 9), for example, suggests the 2010 BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, but was based on a forty-year history of "occurrences" that, she says "...are less known because the industry was not obligated to disclose them."

Oil Rig recalls *Marching Giants*, but here, instead of an advancing procession of towers, a single steely spire presses against the surface, its legs sunk into a sea of black sludge. Metal splinters fly through the air, and one can only faintly discern the outlines of a former "industrial park" fading against a silver metallic sky. Culbertson "painted" the rig using a tangle of collaged paper strips doused with black paint, oozed from the tube. Iridescent pigment and sparkling glitter, suggesting fall-out from a devastating inferno, create a beautiful foil for a ghastly truth.

Although the title *Exxon Valdez* (2010; Fig. 10), refers to the Alaska tanker spill in 1989, its date references the recent BP episode, indicating her frustration and exasperation. Culbertson recycles her iconic billboard, here standing atop a hill, thick with debris made from torn rag paper. A baby seal—an image taken from an old *National Geographic* magazine, worked over with pigment and collaged onto the billboard form—is no longer safe. Except for red ooze trickling within the crevices of the mottled landscape, the entire surface is monochrome silver. The work exists somewhere between a remote airless universe and its abstraction, a collage of melted, then solidified textures.



Fig. 10. Janet Culbertson, *Exxon Valdez* (previously *Billboard Seal in Oil*) (2010), oil, collage, iridescent pigments, canvas, 26" x 34". Photo: Janet Culbertson.



Fig. 11. Janet Culbertson, *BP Oil Spill* (2010), oil, iridescent pigments, on canvas, 34" x 48". Photo: Janet Culbertson.

"The disasters I've seen since the 60s are evermore in the press... People paid less attention when animals seemed to be the victims ... now people are perishing," says Culbertson. *BP Oil Spill* (2010; Fig. 11) an abstract painting directly inspired by the 104-day oil leak into the Gulf of Mexico, alludes to its human toll. Two amorphous shapes suggest heads bobbing in a restless silver sea, thick with clumps of congealed oil. The painting is an homage, not just to the eleven men who died as a result of BP negligence, but to all those who perished in similar disasters.

By no means has Culbertson abandoned vivid color. In *Vanishing Butterflies* (2010; Pl. 12) she reinvents her billboard theme as almost pure color abstraction. It recalls the brilliant sky in *Vanishing Gold*. But now, even the billboards are disintegrating. One large frame floats in the background like a suspended flat screen TV. It generates flashing rays of

turquoise, green, cobalt blue, and red-orange light that zap a foreground signboard. A butterfly decomposes on its frame, hemorrhaging gorgeous color.

"We've substituted for nature," says Culbertson. The colors in *Vanishing Butterflies* are more the hues one gets from contrast—tint-brightness menus on remote control devices; they can never, despite our fidgeting with adjustments—approximate nature's palette.

Eco-art has gone through many changes since Culbertson embraced the genre as a young artist-activist. "Younger artists are taking a different focus, going into the landscape, doing conceptual projects...important things. If I was younger, I might be out there with them," says the artist. "But I have to paint: I like the brush, the smell of turp. This is where I belong."

Culbertson is like the heroine she imagined when she inked her *Mythmaker* series in the 1960s. She saw something very wrong. It made her unhappy and angry. So she took a journey through art to learn more and then give something back. Eco-artists who are today rolling up their sleeves to make Earth a better place can trace their roots to her efforts. While Culbertson did not provide the eco-solutions of today's artist-scientists, with her prescient works she offered a different kind of gift: that of understanding the nature of the problem. In so doing she embedded a yellow brick road into American landscape painting. •

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NOTES

1. Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature, A History of Environmental Ethics*, (Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 127.
2. Taped conversation with the artist, June 20, 2010. All direct quotes not otherwise referenced are from this interview.
3. Exhibited at Twentieth Century West Gallery, New York, 1967; and Paideia Gallery, Los Angeles, 1969.
4. Jenny L. Schlossman, "Janet Culbertson, Political Landscapes," in *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2 (Fall 1992-Winter 1993). These drawings now belong to the permanent collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.
5. Herman Melville, "The Encantadas" in *Bully Budd and other Tales* (New York: Signet via Penguin, 1964), 232. "The Encantadas" were written in 1855 and sporadically published as essays in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* and in *Other Stories: The Piazza Tales* (1856). They were never published as a book, though they have been reprinted many times. The Penguin book cited is the one Culbertson took with her to the Galapagos.
6. Mary Vaughan, "Janet Culbertson," in *Arts Magazine* (April 1977): 4.
7. Introduction, "Earth Keeping/Earth Shaking," in *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1981).
8. Florence Falk, "Karen Silkwood: Laundered News," in *ibid* (*Heresies*): 3.
9. Vicki Goldberg, from *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives* (New York, Abbeville, 1991), in *The American Century, Art & Culture 1950-2000*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1999), 270.
10. Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and The American Mind*, 4th ed., (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1982), 8-17.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Barbara Novak, "The Double-Edged Axe," in *Art in America* (Jan.-Feb. 1976): 45.
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16. Jed Perl, "The Vertical Landscape: In the Redwood Forest Dense," in *Art in America* (Jan-Feb, 1976): 63.
17. Elizabeth Baker, "Artworks on the Land," in *Art in America* (Jan.-Feb.1976): 96.
18. Robert Rosenblum, "Painting America First" in *Art in America* (Jan.-Feb. 1976): 84
19. *Ibid.*
20. Lucy Lippard, "Too Much: The Grand Canyon(s)," in *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 10, (Winter/Spring, 2000): 1-8. See www.gsd.harvard.edu.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Fredrica Wechsler, frontispiece and Introduction, "Janet Culbertson," in Introduction to Catalogue, National Academy of Sciences, (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 1998),
23. Alicia Longwell, in catalogue brochure for "Personal Space: The Domesticated Long Island Landscape" (Southampton, NY: Parrish Art Museum, 2009).
24. Taped interview with Janet Goleas, Curator of the permanent collection, Islip Museum of Art, Islip, New York. August 25, 2010.

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