

Marie Celeste

Prior to his widely successful invention of detective Sherlock Holmes and his colleague Dr. Watson in 1887, Scottish author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle penned an anonymous short mystery based on the actual events of the 1870s maritime vessel, the *Marie Celeste*. In 1881, Doyle published *J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement*, a fictional account of the ill-fated ship, which Doyle rechristened, *Marie Celeste*.¹ The crux of the original story, and Doyle's version of it, lies in the 1872 discovery of the *Marie Celeste*, abandoned and adrift in the Atlantic Ocean. The curiosity and intrigue that emerged derives from what the recovery team encountered upon rescue. Absent were the ten passengers and crew yet, their personal items, food provisions, nautical instruments, and the ship's valuable cargo remained onboard and undisturbed. The passengers were never found, and the reason for their disappearance, though hotly debated, has never been fully explained.

More than a century after its discovery, the *Marie Celeste* remains a steadfast icon of popular culture as the quintessential, archetypal "ghost ship," whose inexplicable mysteries remain fodder for maritime historians, novelists, filmmakers, and myth-makers alike.² In recent years, *Marie Celeste* has become an adjective incorporated into the broader discourse of the scientific and agricultural communities. Now synonymous with the phenomenon of unexplained disappearances, *Marie Celeste* has come describe an environmental and ecological disorder afflicting the North American honeybee population known as "Colony Collapse Disorder" (CCD) or "*Marie Celeste* Disorder."³

Beekeepers and bee scientists first reported the bizarre occurrence of colony failure in 2005.⁴ The syndrome particularly affects the hive's worker bees: they fly off in search of pollen and nectar but never return to the colony. Simply put: "bees were not so much dead as gone."⁵ While scientists, beekeepers, entomologists, and others debate the causes of the disease—which range from the use of agricultural pesticides to the presence of newly discovered pathogens and bacterial fungi in the bees'—all agree that the effects of the rapidly diminishing bee population are having a profound impact on the production of food, local ecologies, and the global economy.⁶

This unsettling disorder joins a host of other environmental catastrophes that have traumatized various geographical locales around the globe lately. Despite living in a scientific and "ultra-technological" era, in which genetic codes can be transcribed and new solar systems have been discovered, the dynamic and spasmodic movements of nature's elemental forces—earth, air, and water—have left humankind in a state of perpetual anxiety and befuddlement. Searching for answers to "why?" and, "how can this happen?", we turn to the scientific experts to explain what we cannot. As Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek remarked in his 2010 opinion, "The end of Nature," "our increasing reliance on specialized science should be questioned. He writes, "Today we look to scientific experts to know all. But they do not, and therein lies the problem... While science can help us, it can't do the whole job. Instead of looking to science to stop our world from ending, we need to look at ourselves and learn to imagine and create a new world."⁷ And, since pre-history, artists have been doing just that.

Artists have long held the responsibility of questioning reality and offering alternative viewpoints. Art makes room for change and possibility—it expresses visually what could be, or should be, rather than what is. As art historian Lucy R. Lippard has long attested, "It's

the artist's job to teach us how to see," and her notion of seeing has never been more urgent or relevant than it is today.

Despite its title, *Marie Celeste* is not an exhibition about bees or unexplained catastrophes. The eleven artists participating in the exhibition ask viewers to see and think about humankind's relationship to Nature—both as a physical environment and an idea—in a variety of ways. Ranging from site-specific installations to painting and photography, the diverse works in this exhibition enter a broad, polyphonic discourse on contemporary art practice and environmental consciousness that has been ongoing since the 1970s.⁸

In a post-industrial era of dwindling natural resources, rising populations and increasing urbanization, the works in *Marie Celeste* probe the boundaries that surround our moral and ethical obligations to care for our environment, now, and in the future, and make manifest the interconnectedness of ecology and technology in the 21st century. And, while the artists in *Marie Celeste* explore the conflicts between individual and collective actions, preservation and transformation, production and reclamation, and notions of disenchantment and optimism, their works are created from a deeply personal artistic practice that is grounded in the production of emotional affect rather than in the production of meaning.

In his seminal book *Ecology Without Nature*, scholar Timothy Morton argues that the primary obstacle to true environmental thinking and profound social change is the very idea of nature itself. For Morton, "Nature" is both an idea and an image that is bound up in the philosophy, literature, and visual art of Romanticism—which has long obscured the darker, more melancholic, uglier version of the non-human world. Moreover, Morton illuminates the ways in which nature writing in particular has separated ecology from nature, framing nature as an object that we consider to be "over there."⁹ In Morton's way of thinking, art has a specific role to play in shifting the way our society and culture think about environmentalism, ecology, and sustainability. If art helped construct a revised image of Nature, then it could help dissolve it as well.

In his recent prequel, *The Ecological Thought*, Morton further collapses the distance that we have put between ourselves and the environment, and expands on notions of coexistence and the interconnectedness between all beings and things. Again, Morton reiterates the critical role that art has to play in creating real change, writing, "Thinking the ecological thought is difficult: it involves becoming open, radically open—open forever, without the possibility of closing again. Studying art provides a platform, because the environment is partly a matter of perception. Art forms have something to tell us about the environment, because they can question reality."¹⁰ For many of the artists in *Marie Celeste*, their modes of questioning take the form of objects that employ strategies of the beautiful and the sublime to subtly captivate and provoke, eliciting emotional responses.

In her photographs, films, and installations, Erika Blumenfeld captures the invisible temporal movements of natural and cosmological phenomena. Informed by phenomenology and the aesthetics of Minimalism, Blumenfeld creates art that translates the abstract and the ethereal into the substantial. Light, and its elemental properties, lies at the core of her practice, and she has captured its astral and earthly presence in spectacular, remote locations. In 2009, Blumenfeld traveled to Antarctica as a Guggenheim Fellow for her proposed *Polar Project*, and her months-long stay there yielded several bodies of work that describe this singular place in terms of topographical textures and intimate details. *Land For* (Fig. 1) is one of three volumes of photographs that capture the stunning, ever-changing Antarctic landscape. The eight

photographs of curving, undulating glacial facades and bubbling frozen lakes formed by powerful catabatic winds were taken in a wind scoop at the Base of Vassalavær, a rock mountain in the Queen Maud Land area of Antarctica.

In effect, Blumenfeld's photographs are emblematic of the awe and terror of Immanuel Kant's eighteenth-century notion of the sublime, yet the images also evoke the perilous situation confronting Antarctica today. The fissures within the dense layers of ice and snow speak silently to the rupturing of Antarctica's fragile ecosystems by climate change, and an increasing desire to extract the vast quantities of oil that lie beneath the surface. As the diverse components of Blumenfeld's *Polar Project* coalesce, the works assume dual functions, as occasions to experience the grandeur of this priceless land and oases of its possible destinies.

New Haven-based artists Jessica Schwind and Joseph Smolinski also use the photographic medium to negotiate the conflicts inherent between preservation and transformation. In her photographs and installations, Schwind explores the quotidian and the personal within the natural landscape. And Smolinski creates paintings, drawings, and animations that frequently question the relationship between nature and technology (Fig. 2). In *Moon Puddle* (Fig. 3), their first collaborative project, the artists created a work that combines their individual artistic languages while exploring a shared concern for the environment. The floor-based sculpture of resin and film subtly depicts the view of a half moon appearing in the night sky. The quietude of the image is upended by its physical setting. The seemingly viscous material evokes the presence of crude oil or some other toxic substance. The accidental puddle recalls the recent BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico whose impact on the wetlands and surrounding environs has yet to be revealed. For *Marie Celeste*, Schwind and Smolinski have created three new mixed media works.

Dead Heads, Bees and Wasps, and *Global Warming* form a sculptural *mondo mori* that foregrounds the future in the present. Notions of preservation and renewal permeate the works of Shari Mendelson. Her "upcycled" vessel—meticulously assembled from discarded plastic drink bottles—mimic in style the urns, goblets, beakers, and bowls of Western and Non-Western antiquity. Yet references to modernity also appear. Reformed plastics masquerade as ceramic and glass vases that once sat atop the shelves and tables in private, domestic interiors. With its attenuated form, irregular surface, and luminous transparency, *Light Green Bottle* (Fig. 4) is emblematic of Mendelson's deft capacity for creating vessels that somehow look old yet new. Although Mendelson's works speak directly to the possibilities of renewal, vis-à-vis the physical processes of reuse and transformation, her work also questions notions of connoisseurship and cultural perceptions of value—which have long been entangled with the old and the historical. In emulating the aura of an artifact while retaining an emphasis on the essential objectness of the vessel, Mendelson reveals the possibility of art to transcend, on a literal and metaphorical level.

Like Shari Mendelson, Jason Middlebrook views artmaking as a form of contemporary alchemy. In his sculptures, drawings, and site-specific installations, Middlebrook transforms the detritus of everyday life into poetic objects that confront our consumer values and propose optimistic alternatives to wasteful excess. In past projects, he has created large-scale, towering structures from the masses of cardboard containers and boxes bound for the recycling



Fig. 2
Jessica Schwind and Joseph Smolinski
Moon Puddle, 2010
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 4
Shari Mendelson
Light Green Bottle, 2011
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 1
Erika Blumenfeld
Land For, 2009
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 3
Jessica Schwind and Joseph Smolinski
Dead Heads, Bees and Wasps, 2010
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 5
Jason Middlebrook
Global Warming, 2010
Courtesy of the artist