

ART & EXHIBITS

Artist finds the zen of Hurricane Harvey in Lawndale show

Virginia Lee Montgomery turns an eye toward the psychic side of Hurricane Harvey with her "SKY LOOP" video installation at Lawndale Art Center.

Molly Glentzer | February 6, 2020 | Updated: February 9, 2020, 8:23 pm



Virginia Lee Montgomery's video installation "SKY LOOP," inspired by Hurricane Harvey, is on view at Lawndale Art Center through March 29. Photo: Virginia Lee Montgomery / Lawndale Art Center

What do butterflies and dripping honey have to do with Hurricane Harvey?

These are among the images that intrigue me as I sink into the cushy seat in Lawndale Art Center's largest gallery to soak up Virginia Lee Montgomery's dreamy, four-screen video installation "SKY LOOP." The seat is actually a sculpture, "Head Stone," made of memory foam squares, which I have not previously considered so metaphorically. A largish river stone in the center creates a dimple: Mattress pile meets Asian rock garden.

“Mom’s Canoe,” an aluminum canoe filled with sand, also helps to ground the show. The installation’s four videos play on four large screens in a way that could make a visitor feel, well, a little loopy. In a good way. Each video is unique but shares a vocabulary of repeated images.

The star of the surreal “Butterfly Birth Bed” video is a miniature Shaker-style bed frame that has cocoons dangling from its rails. A buckeye hatch, and the “eyespot” on its wings echo an image of the eye of a hurricane that appears where a mattress would be. Wendy Vogel’s essay for the show explains that the butterfly effect is a fundamental concept of chaos theory, based on the ideas of meteorology professor Edward Lorenz, who proposed that even small occurrences in nature can have cause-and-effect relationships on a large scale. Montgomery’s choice of an iconic American bed style is a reference to the “proto-feminist subversion” of Mother Ann Lee, the founder of the Shaker sect.

All of this is enlightening, but I am not in the mood to think too hard. The videos cast a dark blue, watery light through the space along with mostly meditative sounds, including slowly plunking water, tones from water bells and spacey electronic music.

The nine-and-a-half minute “Sky Loop” video captures the oddly tranquil sight of a woman rowing a canoe through a forested and flooded neighborhood in a steady rain. A golden substance drips in a slow layer over the landscape. Motor oil? No, this is honey, a substance recognized for its curative powers, Vogel’s essay says. Other scenes show the artist on a high, drifted bank of Buffalo Bayou, running her hands through the sand and close-ups of sand slipping a woman’s hand, as if through an hour glass. The hands belong to three women of different ages – Montgomery, her mother and grandmother.

The artist also layers slow-dripping honey over satellite imagery of Hurricane Harvey's aftermath and the city at night in the seven-minute "Honey Healing Hurricanes." The signature recurring image, which seems to hold steady in the shortest video, "Sky Eye," features the artist's eye as she peeks through a hole she has drilled through a photograph of the eye of the hurricane.

Montgomery, a Houston native who earned her MFA in sculpture from Yale University in 2016, was at home with her mother during the storm, as the neighborhood where she grew up flooded. Circles, spirals, spheres and holes were already recurring symbols in her work, along with her surrealist approach and metaphysical interests. But they gave her a different way to process the trauma.

Her installation feels like what Houston needs now, this far on. Harvey changed the city psychically as well as physically, and a show like "SKY LOOP" reminds us that as time flows, it also can heal.

"SKY LOOP" is up through March 29 at Lawndale Art Center, 4912 Main; 713-528-5858, lawndaleartcenter.org