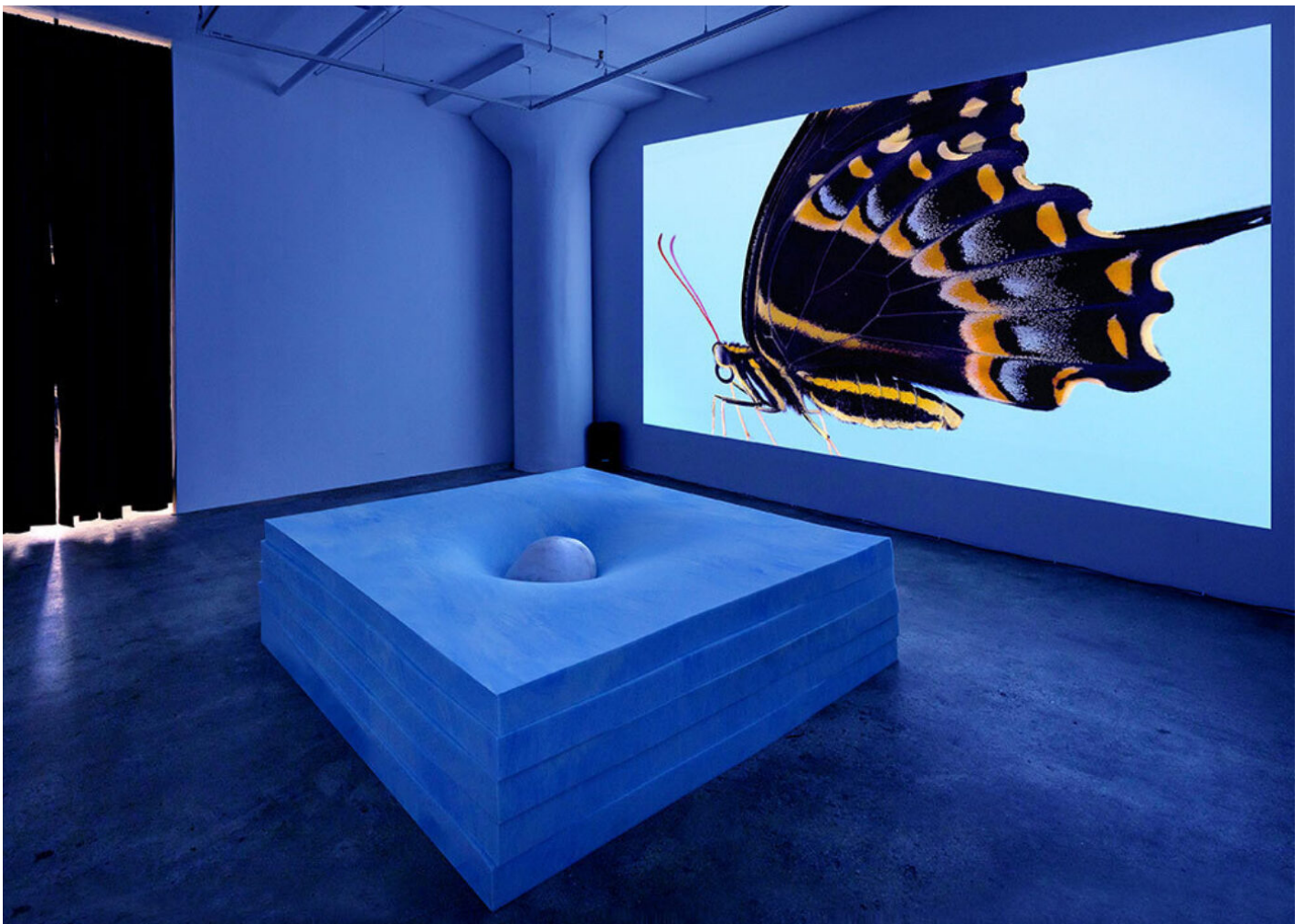


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A New Empathetic Lens: Virginia Lee Montgomery by Martha Tuttle

A hybrid art aims to reveal interconnection.



Installation view of Virginia Lee Montgomery, *Marble Egg*, 2020, marble, 25 x 25 x 25 inches, CalKing-sized memory foam mattress pads; and *Butterfly Birth Bed*, 2020, color digital video, five minutes, thirty-five seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Hesse Flatow.

Earlier this year, Virginia Lee Montgomery and I had a long phone conversation about radical empathy and interspecies tenderness. Although our conversation meandered through philosophy, science, and our experiences of the pandemic, we

kept coming back to how an artwork can generate and encourage empathy: “How can we feel with?” and “How can we facilitate care?” I see these questions as the foundation behind Virginia’s practice, as well as being crucial questions for this ecological and political moment. Through accepting a panpsychic universe as a given—the idea that all beings, things, and objects have consciousness—her work allows an inclusive respect and intimacy with everything from the subjects she engages with (a hurricane, a moth) to the tools she uses (a DSLR camera, a Dewalt drill). Our interview emerged from wanting to give these questions, and how Virginia expresses them in her work, space for expansion and dialogue.

—Martha Tuttle

Martha Tuttle

You refer to yourself as a hybrid artist. Can you describe what you mean by this and why this is a term that encapsulates your practice?

Virginia Lee Montgomery

Hybridic art blurs media with diverse realms of knowledge, like mythology, biology, philosophy, or technology. As a hybrid artist, I work between video, performance, sound, and sculpture; but I also shift freely in subject matter, such as between ponytails, stones, moths, moons, and machines. Collectively, my artistic movements interrogate the relationship between physical and psychic structures, with the intention of opening a portal toward a new empathetic lens. I believe my practice to be a research study of feminist metaphysics to reveal a psychic presence flowing between all things.

MT

Psychic?

VLM

The term “psychic” embodies the realm of the mind, spirit, and soul that exists in a conceptual essence rather than in mattered form. Psychic phenomena can either be experienced firsthand, like within the form of dreams, or empathetically observed in others. The latter can also encourage recognition of the innate consciousness, or psychic potential, of others, human and nonhuman.

MT

The Sword and The Sphinx, which was installed at Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, New York, in 2018, comes to mind as a piece that directly references the hybrid.

VLM

Yes! This public sculpture embodied the concept of hybridity both in concept and sculptural form. Its companion video, *Cut Copy Sphinx* (2018), is also a hybridic media work, existing between sculpture and video. The subject of both artworks is the mythological Sphinx. She’s an enigmatic and femme creature with multiple animalistic characteristics like the breasts of a woman and the claws of a lion. I created the sculpture as a response to the #MeToo movement to represent both the resilience and the complexity of the female experience. *The Sword and The Sphinx* portrays the Sphinx impaled with a steel sword in her back, yet she is still

smirking. Resilience, and a little mysticism, are qualities I strive to imbue in all my subjects across media.



Virginia Lee Montgomery, *Meta Luna, 3/4 Angle*, 2020, C-print, archival paper, framed, 40 × 26 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Hesse Flatow.

MT

I see you utilizing qualities normally positioned as polarities—hardness and softness, strength and delicacy, power and tenderness—as compatriots in dialogue. You also pull together subjects of different scales.

VLM

I love how you say that different qualities arise in symbiosis, not in opposition. In physics, one theory regarding the development of the cosmos holds that spiraling clouds of plasma—Keplerian flows—twirl around growing stars, planets, and black holes to collapse them and generate celestial bodies. Whenever I use my Dewalt drill, I think about how the circular motion I am invoking is akin to the circular motion that generates stars. The scale shift between a Dewalt drill bit, a hurricane, or a black hole is absurd, yet all three entities operate within the twirling logic of physics. In my practice, making connections between seemingly unrelated realms of experience can provide me with new insights about empathy.

MT

Let's talk about inclusive empathy, a subject matter that runs deep throughout your practice. Your exhibition at Hesse Flatow—*DREAM COCOON*—explores the possibility of the gaze being co-experienced between human and nonhuman entities.

VLM

DREAM COCOON comes out of my interests in panpsychism, entomology, and psychoanalysis, and it argues that all matter emerges in tandem with consciousness. I like imagining that as a viewer you are never truly alone in looking at a sculpture, because maybe the sculpture—which is also matter—is simultaneously looking back at you.

The exhibition is a multimedia exploration of metaphysical feminist panpsychism through sculpture, performance, and film. I am presenting a new series of marble ponytail sculptures made after ambiguously erotic shapes of primordial protozoa, and a new dream-logica film—*Butterfly Birth Bed* (2020)—that depicts the lifecycle of the butterfly and her traverse of the ovoid. During the pandemic, I began obsessively stone-carving and raising butterflies and moths as a way to both investigate transfiguration and to explore themes such as “interiority,” “healing,” and “emergence.” In *DREAM COCOON*, the butterflies and moths symbolize hope and the stones provide grounding.

MT

I think a lot of folks are getting behind the idea of nonhuman animacies and consciousnesses as far as they relate to a tree or even a stone. But a ponytail or a camera—maybe there is less of an intuitive inclination to extend consciousness to the human produced or the inorganic.

VLM

I love the ego-destroying consideration that we are all merely arrangements of atoms that share consciousness on a subatomic level. This idea extends consciousness to all atoms around us regardless of whatever shape these atoms take. Thus, cameras, stones, or Luna moths are all potentially conscious by virtue

of the very atoms they contain. Every object around me becomes a collaborator in my artwork—ponytails included.



Virginia Lee Montgomery, *Artemis*, 2020, marble, string, 25 x 5 x 4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Hesse Flatow.

MT

On an intimate scale, your work with moths addresses a relationship of care between the human and the nonhuman.

VLM

Compassionate empathy is not only feeling concern for someone but actively helping in a situation. While raising Luna moths in my home studio over quarantine, I asked myself, “What can I do to help this Luna moth?” Raising and releasing additional Luna moths to benefit the local ecology was my empathetic answer. This morphed into the photo series *Meta Luna* (2020). It’s a small gesture of compassionate empathy, but as the “butterfly effect” philosophy asserts, small gestures can create big change.

MT

And you see these kind of empathy practices as inextricable from a discussion around contemporary feminism?

VLM

From reading Donna Haraway’s *When Species Meet*, I’ve learned there is considerable overlap between posthumanism, ecofeminism, and feminist metaphysics. Haraway reflects upon the ways that our relationships with nonhumans can entrench oppression of all kinds.

I believe that contemporary feminism must be grounded in a panpsychic metaphysics that attributes consciousness all the way down to rocks, plants, machines, and so on in order to neutralize hierarchies that justify oppression. Consider New Zealand’s amazing parliamentary decision in 2017 to grant the Whanganui River the same legal rights as a human. Empathy can exist beyond feeling emotions with someone. It can be used as a tool for action.



Installation view of *Virginia Lee Montgomery: DREAM COCOON*. Courtesy of the artist and Hesse Flatow.

MT

Releasing moths into an environment they both benefit and are benefitted by seems clearly to be an act of empathy. At the same time, the moths are raised and utilized by you for your work. Do you see other forms of intentional human cultivations of the nonhuman—ranching, raising bees, etc.—as potential practices of growing empathy? What changes when the practice of cultivation is framed in an artistic lens?

VLM

There are many examples of human and nonhuman species engaged in cultivation behavior that strike me as respectful—expressions of mutual agency. What comes to mind as an example of sustainable cultivation is the glass eel by the Paqtnkek Mi'kmaw Nation in Canada. For generations the Paqtnkek Mi'kmaw have cultivated, eaten, and used eels for materials, medicine, and spiritual offerings. Currently, there are many examples of legal battles in which the Paqtnkek Mi'kmaw fight to protect the eels and to prevent over-fishing from outside agencies as global demand for eel meat challenges these sustainable practices.

I argue that anyone who cares deeply about sustainability does so from a place of empathy. While, yes, our world is full of many examples of exploitative human/nonhuman activities, there are many examples of empathetic practices too.

How does an artistic lens help bring into focus practices of radical empathy? As artists we are equal parts makers, thinkers, and educators. The role of the artistic lens can illuminate insights about human/nonhuman relationships while also educating about empathy. Everything we engage, use, or consume comes from somewhere, something, someone. I believe the artistic lens can aid in the empathetic understanding of our complex relationship to use, care, and connection.

[Virginia Lee Montgomery: DREAM COCOON](#) *is on view at Hesse Flatow in New York City until November 21.*

Martha Tuttle is a multidisciplinary artist based in Brooklyn, NY.

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