

# carla

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## Sarah McMenimen at Garden

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A series of coiling sculptures were clustered across the floor of Garden's second level granny flat in Sarah McMenimen's *Mud*. The works, three-dimensional aluminum forms, are composed of cast seashells. *A Cursed Leaf* and *Swamp Rose* (all works 2019) undulate; others, like *Yellow Throated Flyer* and *Hermit Thrush* bend in sharp precarious angles. Still, they all seem to have a self-organizing shape, like coral or stacking DNA strands. Some, *Full Moon Moth*

and *Equator (Distant Thunder)*, seem like pre-sentient limbs, perched in potential motion. After assembling the shells into a flowing arrangement, the artist masks the work with a mold, and then burns the shells away to create the metal sculpture. The resulting forms seem to accumulate and unfurl—they emerge out of collaboration rather than coercion. McMenimen acts as an archivist, collecting and reproducing forms while protecting their integrity from too much human influence. She carried these themes throughout *Mud*, negotiating the boundaries of the human ego and the natural world with humility in its most literal sense: on the ground.

The *Aggregate* series (titled *Travertine*, *Los Angeles* and *Inyo*, respectively) emerged out of a careful collaboration between process and landscape. After months of collecting plaster casts of human and animal prints during hikes throughout Los Angeles, the artist pressed the prints into resin, dirt, and clay, turning her collection of imprints into positive relief. The resulting wall works appear somewhere between topsoil and text, as the prints drift into a “semantic tangle.”<sup>1</sup> Artist Anni Albers' view of textiles is helpful here; for Albers, the handmade offers “an organic transmutation of form” that can't be replicated by machinery.<sup>2</sup> Material is evidence of process, and for Albers, bringing the body closer to both makes it possible to leave a trace of the human in the final form. McMenimen engages in this transmutation in her *Aggregates*, but instead of hand and cloth, she uses “kindred bodies”<sup>3</sup>—her feet

and the feet of animals—to weave together disparate times and places.

The traditional (and often male) genre of landscape painting might center around the self, ignoring the organic materials that physically make the work possible (canvas, horsehair brush, and mineral pigments are all sourced from the natural world). The colors, texture, and mark-making of the *Aggregate* series are not representations of the landscape but instead a collapsing of both material and the resulting forms. The work is not a visual reference on a canvas, but it rather displays the process of its own shaping; what Charles Ray might call a “pneumatic sculpture,”<sup>4</sup> a work made from *pnuema*—a word used for life, spirit, or breath. In other words, McMenimen does not depict landscapes but displays forms emerging from her own body as she navigated them. Arne Naess, the philosopher and founder of the deep ecology movement, would call this a search for the “ecological self,” an enlargement of the self-centered ego into larger ecological contexts.<sup>5</sup> McMenimen's *Aggregate* series gather this search into legible form.

To get at this idea, the gallery uses the term “ecotone,” the place where two ecologies meet and interpenetrate. McMenimen's reliefs negotiate the boundaries of human and animal, art practice and landscape, subject matter and material, weaving them all together into aesthetic objects. What makes this show so compelling is how her work, especially the *Aggregates*, offer insight for viewers navigating their own

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1. Steve Harrison and Deborah Tatar, “Places: People, Events, Loci—the Relation of Semantic Frames in the Construction of Place,” *Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, 17, no. 2 (2008).

2. Anni Albers, “Designing,” *Craft Horizons*, 1943.

3. From the *Mud* exhibition text provided by Garden.



intersecting social and biological boundaries. In a book on art and the politics of land use, Lucy R. Lippard suggests that art can be a “restorative vehicle” that might “open cracks into other worlds” and “rehabilitate the role of the communal imagination.”<sup>6</sup> The *Aggregates* gather these fracturing boundaries into one place where they might be rehabilitated. Like Ana Mendieta’s *Body Tracks* (1982)—where the artist marked gallery walls with a mixture of blood and pigment—McMenimen gathers together time (the months of collecting prints) and place (the Los Angeles biome) into forms that invite viewers toward that shared imagination.<sup>7</sup> The *Aggregates* are like maps that can help viewers return to surrounding landscapes with the same embodied awareness of the artist.

McMenimen’s careful choices move toward another complicated ecotone: art and ethics. As Yale theologian Willie James Jennings wrote: “We are joined at the site of the dirt, and the dirt is our undeniable kin.... We are creatures bound together.”<sup>8</sup> When McMenimen creates sculptures that dialogue with the natural shapes of shells rather than contort them into another symbolic object, she’s allowing interdependence to shape her art process. Reflecting on the land and those who walk across it can lead the eyes outward to larger social fabrics—and those who are ignored or harmed by the machineries that shape it. Joining her with hands and feet in the mud is an act of communal imagination, a growing awareness of bodies bound to the land and to one another.

4. Charles Ray, “Log,” *DOMUS* (2007). For more on *pneuma*, see the artist’s text for *Hinoki*.

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5. For more, see Einar Strumse, “The Ecological Self: A Psychological Perspective on Anthropogenic Environmental Change,” *European Journal of Science and Theology*, January 2007.

6. Lucy Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (New York: The New Press, 2014), pp. 8–9.

7. “My art is grounded in the belief of one universal energy which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant from plant to galaxy. My works are the irrigation veins of this universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, the primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world,” wrote Ana Mendieta, in her journals, quoted in Anabel Roque Rodríguez’s “Ana Mendieta—An Artwork As a Dialogue between the Landscape and the Female Body,” *Widewalls*, January 2016.

8. Willie Jennings, “Can White People Be Saved? Reflections on the Relationship of Missions and Whiteness,” *Can “White” People Be Saved?: Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018). Note: Dr. Jennings’ essay argues that whiteness begins with a rejection of the body’s relationship to land. In this context, McMenimen’s non-hierarchical embodied practice might be read as a map for navigating social ecotones.



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Above: Sarah McMenimen, *Inyo Aggregate* (2019).  
Resin, dirt, and clay, 30 x 27 inches.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Garden,  
Los Angeles. Photo: Marten Elder.

Below: Sarah McMenimen, *Mud*  
(installation view) (2019). Image courtesy  
of the artist and Garden, Los Angeles.  
Photo: Marten Elder.