

...no footprints, even.

Jessica Houston

Vanderbilt University Museum of Art

January 30 to May 11, 2025

The history of arctic exploration and polar art abounds with images of sublime wonder, colonial appropriation, and heroic masculinity. Over many centuries, European and North American imagemakers have imagined our planet's polar regions as timeless zones awaiting bold human deeds in search of meaning and life. Inhospitable and full of hazards, polar landscapes according to this tradition have either served as mere backdrops to individual gestures of bravery and endurance or showcased the folly and fragility of any human endeavor.

The work of Montréal-based artist Jessica Houston unsettles such imagery while developing new approaches to the poles' icy landscapes. Shown for the first time in this constellation, *...no footprints, even.* gathers four recent bodies of work. Though different in scope, medium, and process, these projects share an impulse to read dominant polar representations and travel narratives against the grain. They ask viewers to consider the deep time of geological processes; to decolonize the visual language of dominant polar art; to imagine alternate modes of polar travel that respect the entangled nature of the human and the nonhuman; and to investigate momentous resonances between art, science, and spiritualism. Troubled by the impact of human-induced climate change on Earth's polar regions, Houston's paintings, collages, photographs, and audio works offer glimpses of what it might take to walk more lightly on this planet.

All works are by Jessica Houston and courtesy of the artist and Art Mûr Gallery, unless otherwise noted.



Upon The Polar Hem, 2022

Oil on wood panel

5 x 7 inches

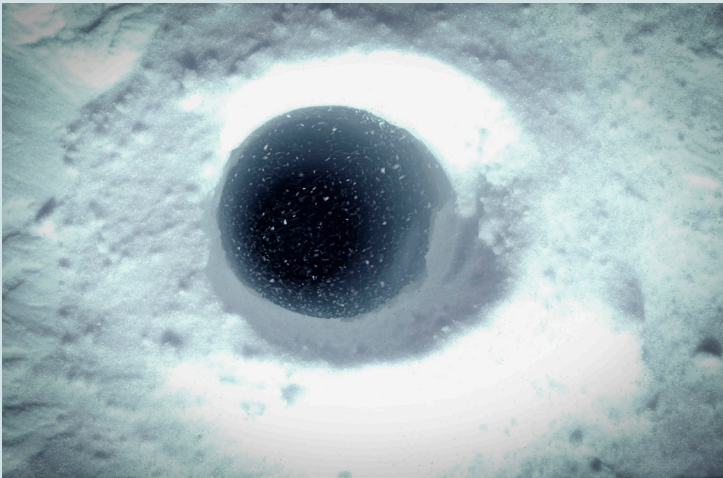
Letters to the Future

Letters to the Future is a thousand-year collaboration with Antarctic ice. The work exhibited here includes photographs of a time capsule buried in a glacier on Dronning Maud Land in 2019. According to on-site measurements, the capsule will drift for roughly 1,000 years before the glacier will deliver it to the open sea.

Houston's capsule contains twenty-two handwritten letters by poets, Indigenous leaders, artists, scientists, and environmental activists, all asked to send missives to unknown readers in the next millennium. No one has seen these letters, except the authors themselves. By withholding their contents, Houston invites us to imagine their messages and think about our own present through the lens of deep time. Ultimately, Houston's collaborative piece asks the viewer to re-envision their place in the long history of our planet with renewed sensitivity and urgency.

Antarctic Ice Velocity Map (courtesy of Charles Brunette, Carleton University), Capsule, and Deployment II (Inserting Letters in Ice) - Antarctica, 2019 (photo courtesy of Alain Hubert)

Archival digital print
18 x 26 inches



Deployment III (Ice Hole with Letters) - Antarctica, 2019

Archival digital print
24 x 36 inches
Photo courtesy of Alain Hubert,
International Polar Foundation



Deployment Site: 70.5700 S, 23.6086 E – Antarctica, 2019

Archival digital print
24 x 36 inches
Photo courtesy of Alain Hubert,
International Polar Foundation



Letters to the Future - Antarctica, 2019
Archival digital print
48 x 72 inches



Cindy Blackstock, 2018
Archival digital print
11 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches



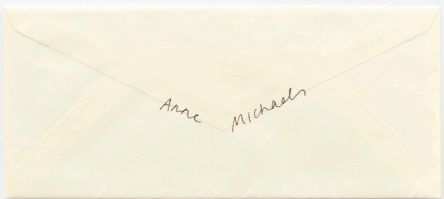
Rosi Braidotti, 2018
Archival digital print
11 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches



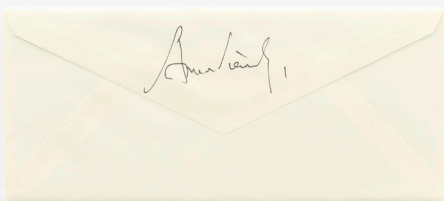
Okalik Egeesiak, 2018
Archival digital print
11 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches



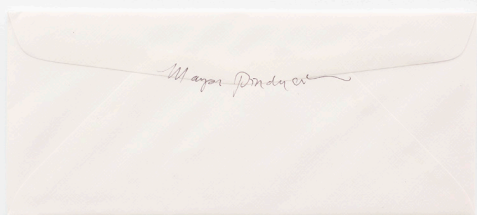
Oli Kaunga, 2018
Archival digital print
11 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches



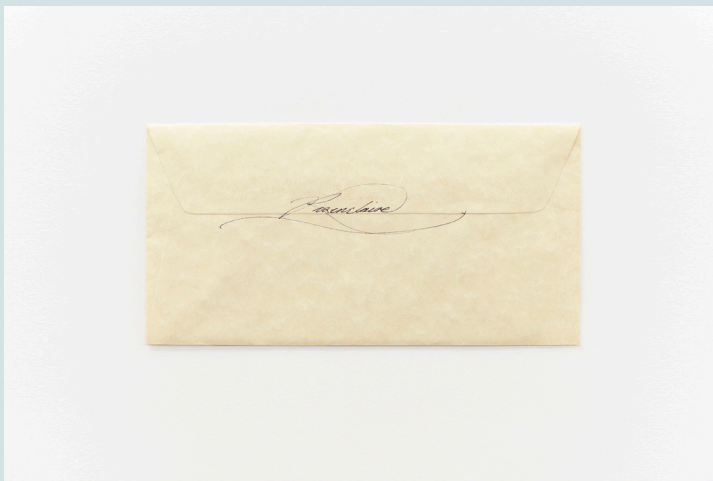
Anne Michaels, 2018
Archival digital print
11 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches



Arvo Pärt, 2018
Archival digital print
11 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches



Maya Pindyck, 2018
Archival digital print
11 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches



Rosenclaire, 2018
Archival digital print
11 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches



Carlo Rovelli, 2018
Archival digital print
11 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches



Gavin Schmidt, 2018
Archival digital print
11 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches



Rose Tremblay, 2018
Archival digital print
11 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches



Zoe Tremblay, 2018
Archival digital print
11 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches

Audio works, center of the gallery:

Headphone #1:

Rosi Braidotti, 2019

Author of *The Posthuman*; post-humanist philosopher. She reads from her book *Posthuman Knowledge*, with permission from Polity Press.

Headphone #2:

Arvo Pärt, 1993

Composer. *Te Deum*, Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, Tõnu Kaljuste. Courtesy of SOCAN and EMS. Release date: January 9, 1993.

Headphone #3:

Anne Michaels, 2019

Poet and novelist. She reads from her book *All We Saw*, with permission from Penguin Random House Press.

Carlo Rovelli, 2019

Theoretical physicist and author of *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* and *The Order of Time*. He reads from his book *The Order of Time*, with permission from Penguin Random House Press.

Rosenclaire, 2019

Collaborative artist duo.

Gavin Schmidt, 2019

Climatologist. Director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies.

ᑲᑦᓴᑦ ᑲᑦᓴᑦ E7-1865 Okalik Egeesiak, 2019

Former chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council.

Maya Pindyck, 2019

Poet, artist, and assistant professor and director of writing at Moore College of Art & Design. She reads her poem "Boy."

Over the Edge of the World

Western accounts typically picture polar regions as both tabula rasa and frontier: as barren lands void of history, and as boundless landscapes merely awaiting human conquest, appropriation, and extraction. In *Over the Edge of the World*, Houston assembles found images from National Geographic to derail such conceptions. Her collages deconstruct the image of polar expeditions as expressions of masculine heroism, as much as they question romantic tropes that picture polar landscapes as sublime wonders. An archive of missed opportunities, *Over the Edge of the World* invites the viewer to visualize future polar encounters that break away from how even well-meaning tourism and nature documentaries today transform the poles into familiar, smooth, and clean objects of consumption.



The Long Haul, 2022

Collage

14 x 20 inches



Mine At Last, 2022

Collage

14 x 20 inches



No Such Border, 2022

Collage

14 x 20 inches

The Yelcho Expedition of the Antarctic, 1909-1910

In this series of oil paintings, Houston reimagines scenes from “Sur,” a 1982 short story by Ursula K. Le Guin about an all-female expedition to Antarctica. In Le Guin’s story nine women board the steamer Yelcho in southern Chile in 1909 to travel to Antarctica and then journey across the ice to reach the South Pole, well before any other explorers. After their return, they decide to hide their expedition journals, to leave no trace of their achievement. Guided by collaboration, the withholding of their story expresses their desire to leave as few marks on the land as possible.

Houston’s paintings reflect on the tension between historical and fictional explorations and question the colonial drive of many polar expeditions. In Houston’s painting, the ice appears neither pristine nor conquered. It is dark, swirling, and uncertain. It evokes the dangers of the journey as much as the dangers these journeys pose to the land. Survival here is never guaranteed, neither for the explorer nor for the explored.



1. **“A SUMMARY REPORT OF THE YELCHO EXPEDITION TO THE ANTARCTIC, 1909-1910. Although I have no intention of publishing this report, I think it would be nice if a grandchild of mine, or somebody’s grandchild, happened to find it some day; so I shall keep it in the leather trunk in the attic, along with Rosita’s christening dress and Juanito’s silver rattle and my wedding shoes and finneskos.”**, 2022
Oil on wood panel
9 x 12 inches



2. **“When I was little more than a child my imagination was caught by a newspaper account of the voyage of the Belgica...”**, 2022
Oil on wood panel
9 x 12 inches



3.
“...last Thule of the South, which lies on our maps and globes like a white cloud, a void, fringed here and there with scraps of coastline, dubious capes, suppositious islands, headlands that may or may not be there: Antarctica.”, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 12 inches



4.
“Well if Captain Scott can do it, why can't we?”, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 12 inches



5.
“The nine of us worked things out amongst us from the beginning to end without any orders being given by anybody.”, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 12 inches



6.
“The little Yelcho steamed cheerily along through gale and gleam, climbing up and down those seas of the Southern Ocean that ran unbroken round the world.”, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 12 inches



7.
“We came in sight of the place where Captain Scott’s party had gone ashore and sent up their hydrogen-gas balloon for reconnaissance and photography.”, 2022
Oil on wood panel
9 x 12 inches



8.
“...there was a considerable bay, full of the beautiful and terrific orca whales playing and spouting in the sunshine of that brilliant southern spring.”, 2022
Oil on wood panel
9 x 12 inches



9.
“The Yelcho anchored in Arrival Bay, and we went ashore in a ship’s boat.”, 2022
Oil on wood panel
9 x 12 inches



10.
“Eight Adélie Penguins immediately came to greet us ... They insisted on us going to visit Hut Point, where the large structure built by Captain Scott’s party stood...”, 2022
Oil on wood panel
9 x 12 inches



II.

“The backside of heroism is often rather sad; women and servants know that ...But the achievement is smaller than men think. What is large is the sky, the earth, the sea, the soul.”, 2022

Oil on wood panel

9 x 12 inches



I2.

“The steam from our own small funnel faded blue on the twilit water as we crept along under the towering pale wall of ice.”, 2022

Oil on wood panel

9 x 12 inches



I3.

“Exposed as our camp was to every wind, we built no rigid structures above ground. We set up tents to shelter in while we dug a series of cubicles in the ice itself.”, 2022

Oil on wood panel

9 x 12 inches



I4.

“She dug out one more cell just under the ice surface, and there, alone, she worked at sculptures ... But she could not bring them north. That is the penalty for carving in water. ”, 2022

Oil on wood panel

9 x 12 inches



I5.

“That evening, in the long orange twilight of October, we saw the topmast of the Yelcho go down the north horizon, over the edge of the world, leaving us to ice, and silence, and the Pole.”, 2022

Oil on wood panel

9 x 12 inches



I6.

“...we were sledgehaulers at least as good as Captain Scott’s husky dogs.”, 2022

Oil on wood panel

9 x 12 inches



I7.

“On the twenty-second of December, 1909, we reached the South Pole... Nothing of any kind marked the dreary whiteness. We discussed leaving some kind of mark or monument, a snow cairn, a tent pole and flag; but there seemed no particular reason to do so.”, 2022

Oil on wood panel

9 x 12 inches



I8.

“All that week the blizzard wind pursued us like a pack of mad dogs... I wished we had not gone to the Pole. I think I wish it even now. But I was glad even then that we had left no sign there, for some man longing to be the first might come someday, and find it, and know then what a fool he had been, and break his heart.”, 2022

Oil on wood panel

9 x 12 inches



19.

“Of the return voyage there is nothing to tell... In 1912 all the world learned that the brave Norwegian Amundsen had reached the South Pole; and then, much later, came the accounts of how Captain Scott and his men had come there after him, but did not come home again...I add this last note in 1929... We are old women now...with grandchildren who might someday like to read about the Expedition... But they must not let Mr. Amundsen know! He would be terribly embarrassed and disappointed. There is no need for him or anyone outside the family to know.”, 2022

Oil on wood panel

9 x 12 inches



20.

“We left no footprints, even.”, 2022

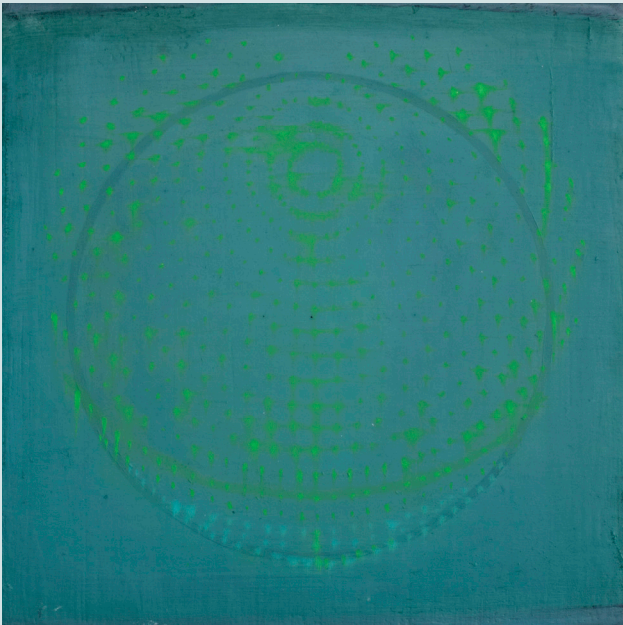
Oil on wood panel

9 x 12 inches

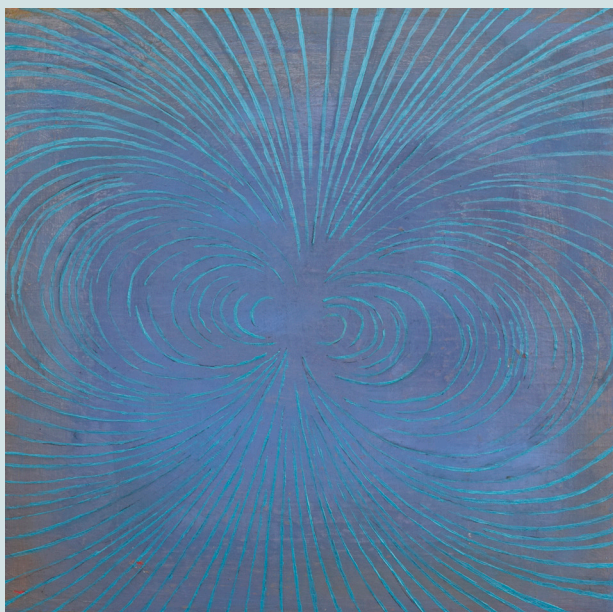
The Magnetic Observatory

The Magnetic Observatory joins Houston's interest in narratives of polar exploration, Ursula Le Guin's writing, and ancient philosophies of magnetism. Theories of magnetic attraction date back to 600 BCE, when Thales of Miletus observed that magnetic lodestones could move iron, influencing his belief that metals and minerals are endowed with lives and souls. More recently, Captain Robert Falcon Scott's voyage to Antarctica in 1904—referenced in Le Guin's "Sur"—was one of the first scientific expeditions to study Earth's magnetism.

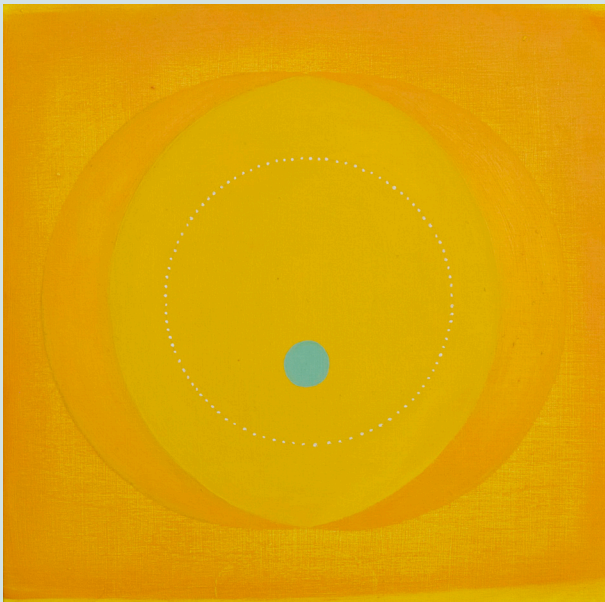
In Houston's work, magnetism offers a metaphor for the power of invisible attractions and spiritual orientations. As her paintings blend allusions to esoteric speculation on magnetism with modern navigation charts, they explore mysterious connections between body and mind, the planetary and the cosmological. *The Magnetic Observatory* concludes with an excerpt from Le Guin's translation of the Tao Te Ching. It reminds us that this world is a sacred object, one we must walk more lightly upon.



Heart World, 2022
Oil on wood panel
9 x 9 inches

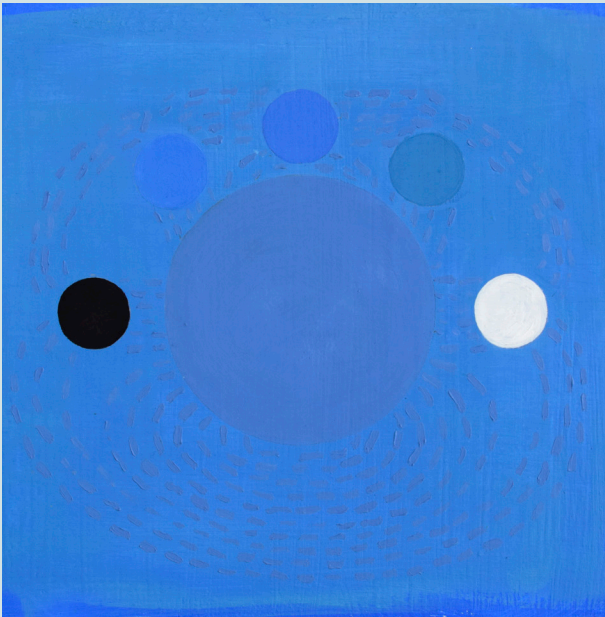


Both Above and Below, 2022
Oil on wood panel
9 x 9 inches



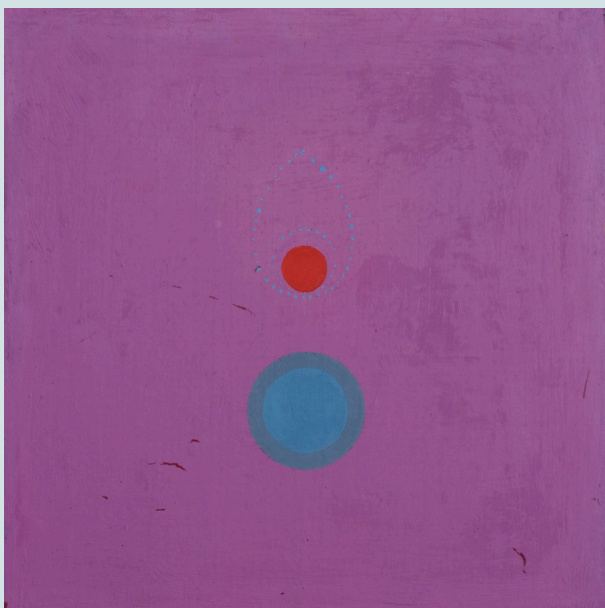
Of a Difference in Which the Differences Are Inseparable, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 9 inches



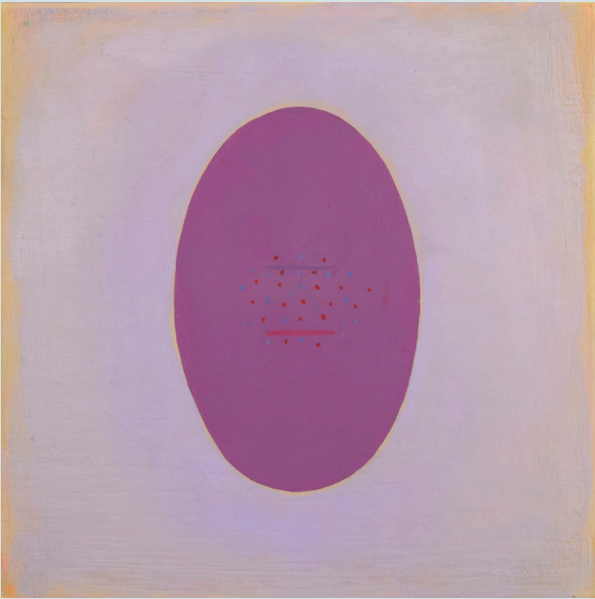
If the Two Realities Are Thus Brought Together, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 9 inches



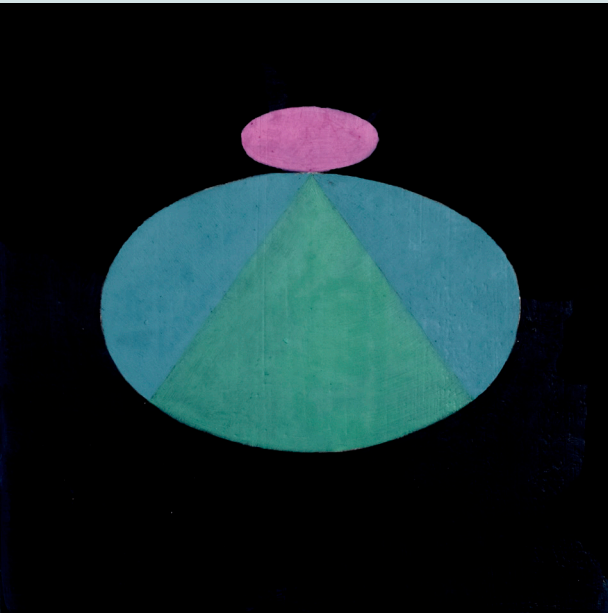
Between Them, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 9 inches



Action Which Enables Us to Project Our Forces Into the Outside World, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 9 inches



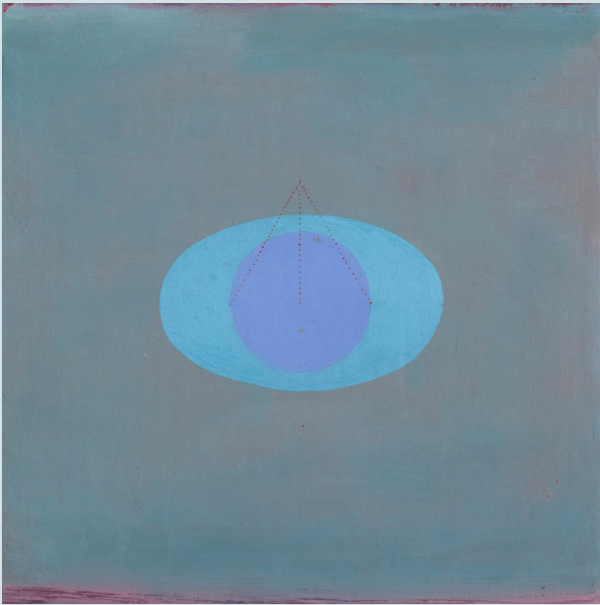
Holding Up and Attracting the Earth, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 9 inches



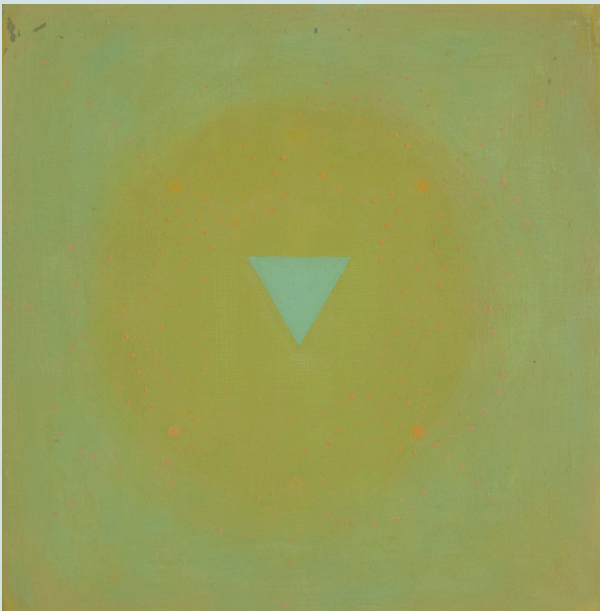
Around Us and Within Us, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 9 inches



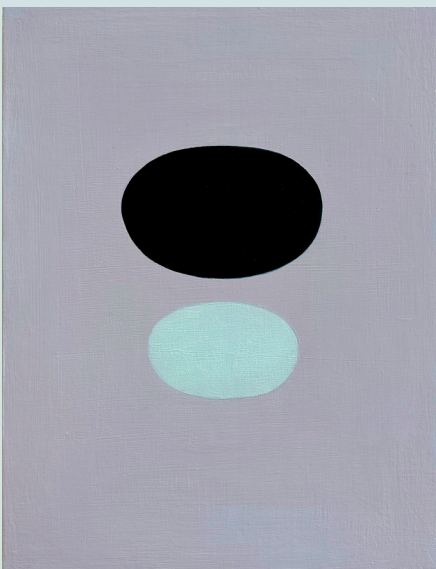
There Remains an Irreducible Parity, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 9 inches



A Changing Field, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 9 inches



A Balancing Land, 2022

Oil on wood panel
9 x 12 inches

The Earth is A Magnet, 2022

Book and lodestones on pedestal placed in front of wall
2”h x 6”d x 9”w

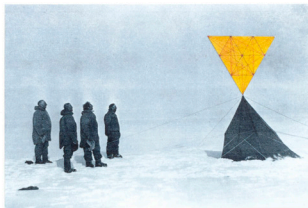
To the right of the gallery entrance:



Into Mystery Land Beyond the Pole

Into Mystery Land Beyond the Pole, 2022

Collage
10 x 14 inches



Before
opening the overhead door to the storm,
they discussed their launching strategy.

They discussed Their Launching Strategy, 2022

Collage
10 x 14 inches



They surveyed the mountain
peaks as philosophical

Mountain Peaks as Philosophical, 2022

Collage
10 x 14 inches

Programming

Join us at VUMA for events and activities throughout the run of *...no footprints, even.*

Saturday, February 1

Opening reception, 5 to 8 p.m.

Tuesday, February 18

Collage workshop and gallery tour, 1 to 4 p.m.

Jessica Houston will lead a collage-making activity inspired by works in *...no footprints, even.* and will give a tour of the exhibition.

Wednesday, February 19

Artist's talk, 4:10 p.m.

Jessica Houston will discuss her practice in a talk sponsored by the Vanderbilt department of art

Friday, February 21

Deep Time, Magnetism, Exploration, and Polar Humanities: Talk Back Across Disciplines, 7 p.m.

A special offsite program brings artist Jessica Houston together with Vanderbilt faculty and Dyer Observatory director William K. Teets (\$5 admission, with livestream; please note this program is hosted by Dyer Observatory, 1000 Oman Dr, Brentwood, TN 37027)

Tuesday, March 18

Gallery tour, 4 p.m.

Join co-curator Jana Harper, professor of the practice in the Vanderbilt department of art, for a tour of the exhibition

Saturday, March 22

I <3 Cold Boys: The Terror, the Franklin Expedition, and Making Fans of History, 11 a.m.

Fan culture expert Allegra Rosenberg, author of the upcoming book *Fandom Forever (And Ever)* (Norton) and organizer of the Terror Camp fan conference, leads a participatory workshop on collective storytelling about arctic exploration

Tuesday, April 8

Time Traveling Astronaut Vampires: Life, Time, and Research in Antarctica, 4:30 p.m.

Dan Morgan, Vanderbilt principal senior lecturer in Earth and environmental science, leads a fast-paced discussion of his Antarctic research and travels with Vanderbilt students to Antarctica

Wednesday, April 16

Gallery tour, 4 p.m.

Join co-curator Lutz Koepnick, Max Kade Foundation chair in German studies and a professor of cinema and media arts at Vanderbilt, for a tour of the exhibition

Access

VUMA is committed to being a safe, inclusive space for everyone. We care deeply about connecting all of our visitors to art through our collections and programs.

VUMA's gallery is on the second floor of Cohen Memorial Hall and step-free access is available from street level via elevator. From the 21st Avenue entrance, find the elevator to the left and follow signs to the gallery on the lawn side of the building. A wheelchair-accessible bathroom is available across from the elevator on the ground floor.

All-gender restrooms are available in Cohen Memorial Hall on the ground floor of the building, across from the elevator and Room TKTK.

VUMA programs are supported with American Sign Language interpretation from Bridges for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

Large text versions of gallery texts are available at the front desk.

Contact Mary Anne Caton (mary.a.caton@vanderbilt.edu) with further questions about access or needs not listed here.

Credits

Curators

Jana Harper, Lutz Koepnick, Rachel P. Kreiter

Registration and procurement

Rachelle Wilson

Programs and outreach

Mary Anne Caton

Branding and design

Carrie Lynn Stanford, Amy Kuttab

Installation

Art Up Nashville

Print services

AlphaGraphics Music City, BIG Visual Group

All works are courtesy of the artist and Art Mûr Gallery unless otherwise noted.

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