
Merion Estes
Unnatural Disasters

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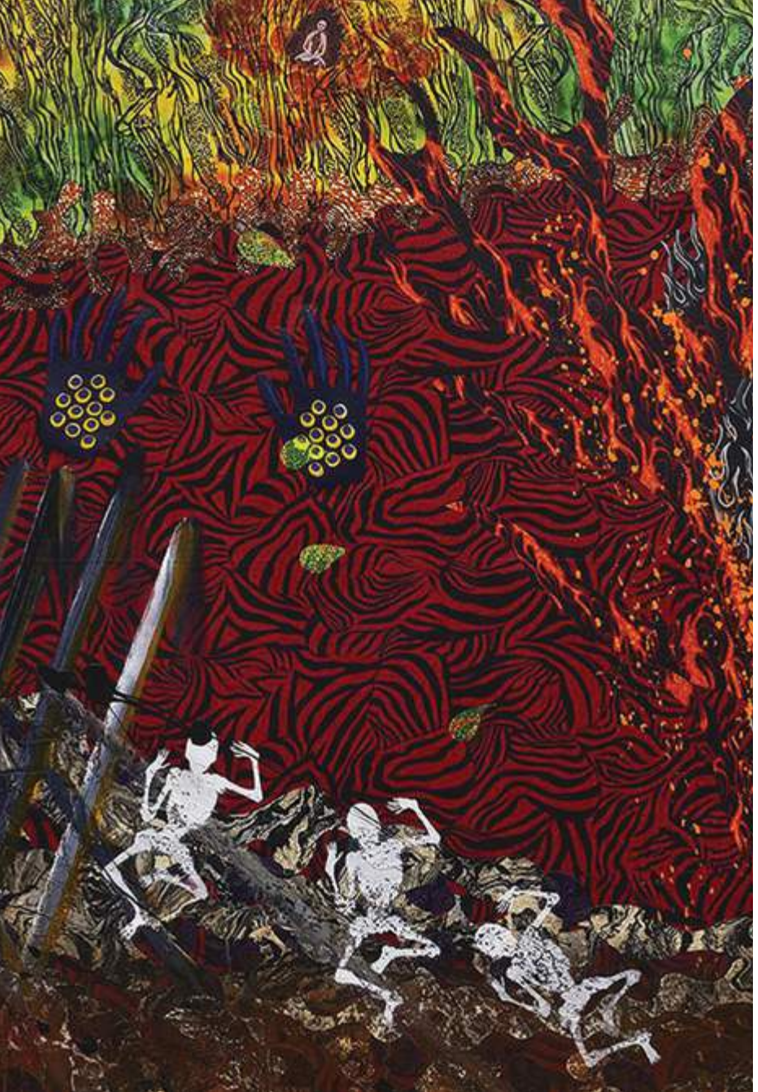

Collateral Damage, 2012
55 x 79½ in.
(detail)
Fabric collage and acrylic paint on printed fabric with photo transfer
Courtesy of the artist

Merion Estes: Unnatural Disasters
September 30, 2018 – January 6, 2019
Craft & Folk Art Museum
Los Angeles, California

This exhibition and its catalogue essay were produced by independent curator Howard N. Fox for the Craft & Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles.

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All photos by Matt Kazmer, unless otherwise noted.

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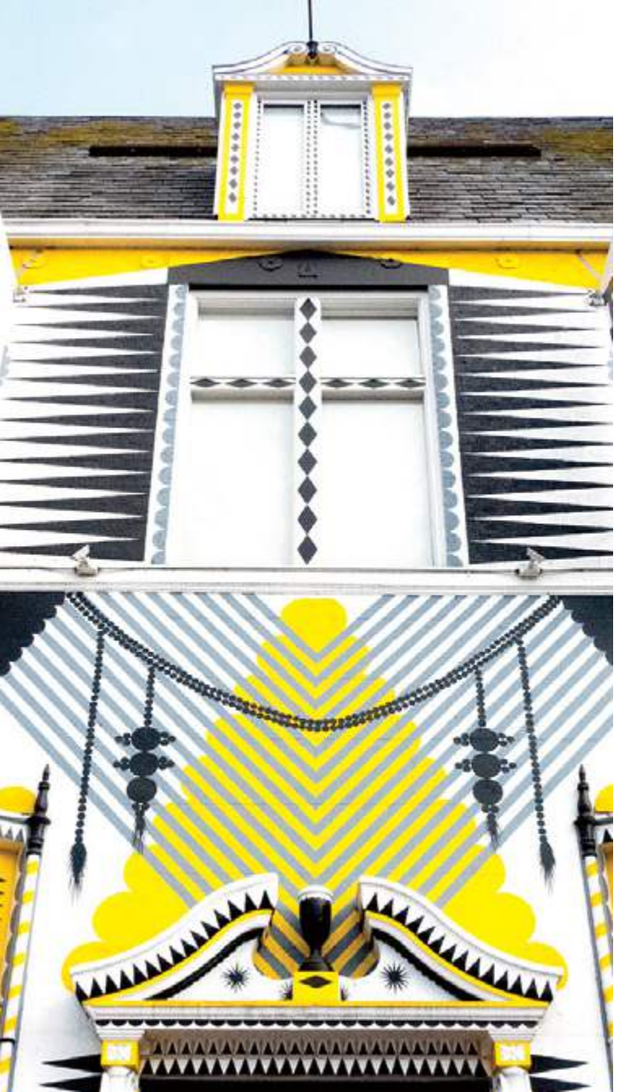
CRAFT & FOLK ART MUSEUM

Cooling Trend, 2017
86 x 111 in.
(cover image, detail)
Fabric collage and spray paint on canvas
Courtesy of the artist



The Craft & Folk Art Museum (CAFAM) presents *Merion Estes: Unnatural Disasters,* a core sampling of the Los Angeles-based artist's visually dazzling and often politically motivated art. This exhibition presents approximately twenty-six key paintings and sculptures by Estes from 1977 to the present. Her oeuvre comprises a unique and stirring body of collages of mass-manufactured printed fabrics with mixed paint applications and photo transfers to create evocative, saturated landscapes that are simultaneously beautiful and disturbing. Her stunning, multi-layered paintings, beautiful as they are, explore the devastation caused by modern-day environmental crises—such as global warming, the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, and the Fukushima nuclear reactor meltdown—and their lasting impact on Earth. CAFAM is excited to show Merion Estes's art, which so provocatively combines pure visual delight with an ardent cautionary message about how humanity's stewardship of nature has profound consequences for the future of our planet.

This exhibition furthers CAFAM's mission to embrace the intersection of various art forms—painting, photography, collage, and textiles—as it introduces one of Los Angeles's most captivating artists to new audiences. From her earliest days as a professional artist in the 1970s, Estes has evinced a strong interest in decorative surfaces, patterning, and dynamic and colorful compositions that awe in their robust visual energy. Estes was a pioneering member of the Pattern and Decoration painting style as well as an activist in the early feminist art movement, both of which developed concurrently in New York City and California in the 1970s. Her interest in formal innovation and visual sumptuousness abides today, together with her focus on the ways in which contemporary civilization must reclaim its collective natural well-being.

A heartfelt thank you to our exhibition and catalogue sponsors: Antonia & Vladimer Kulaev Cultural Heritage Fund; Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los Angeles; and the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation. Thank you to the always-wonderful guest curator Howard N. Fox and to Merion Estes for sharing her work. A special thank you to the museum's board of trustees and the entire museum staff for all you do to make our exhibitions and programs possible.

Suzanne Isken
Executive Director, Craft & Folk Art Museum

Photo: Craft & Folk Art Museum

First my deepest thanks to the esteemed Howard N. Fox for curating this show of my seldom seen paintings from the last decade or so. He is known as the "artists' curator" to many. His insights when looking and talking about paintings are remarkable and, thankfully, there still is a museum curator who loves painting.

Thanks to the incredible and professional staff at the Craft & Folk Art Museum for agreeing to host the show. As I turned eighty years old this month, I am honored and pleased to acknowledge that this is the best birthday present of my life!

Thanks to Rebecca McGrew who curated a thirty-five-year retrospective in 2006 at the Pomona College Museum of Art in Claremont. Her recognition of my work as an important contribution to the history of feminist art and the Pattern and Decoration movements was invaluable and a real affirmation that my life's work mattered. It has kept me going during the long drought since then.

I must acknowledge my gratitude for receiving the 2017 Murray Reich Distinguished Artist Award from the New York Foundation for the Arts. It has afforded me time and materials to work as well as to make a catalogue published on the occasion of my most recent show at CB1 Gallery in Los Angeles earlier in the year. Thank you to the family of Murray Reich!

On a personal note, my everlasting appreciation to my husband of thirty-plus years whose loyalty and support for my art has never wavered. That is a rare trait to find for a woman artist! Lastly, my love and respect for the artists that have been comrades and colleagues and especially to Constance Mallinson, Cynthia Carlson and Harmony Hammond....who never forgot.

Merion Estes
May 2018

As an independent curator of contemporary art, I am exceptionally pleased to organize *Merion Estes: Unnatural Disasters,* an exhibition of one of the most exciting and challenging artists working today.

I first thank the Craft & Folk Art Museum (CAFAM) for hosting this project. I've enjoyed the privilege and prestige of working with one of America's premier museums in its field twice before. In particular, I am grateful to executive director Suzanne Isken, exhibitions curator Holly Jerger, and manager of exhibitions and communications Sasha Ali for their respective talents, their mutual professionalism and their ever-welcome—and welcoming—amiability. Their spirited colleague Andres Payan coordinated and produced the numerous educational programs associated with this show, and Chenoa Cressey designed its handsome catalogue. My dear friend Pablo Capra (not a CAFAM staffer) served as freelance editor of my text. What a pleasure it was to work with each and all of them! I am proud to share my thanks to them publicly, as I have done personally.

Gallerist Clyde Beswick and his associate Nowell Karten of the former CB1 Gallery in Los Angeles provided significant information and contacts to produce this project; I thank them for their care and assistance. Accordingly, I also thank the lenders to this exhibition, who are not only devotees and thoughtful observers of Merion Estes's art but are also collectors and patrons.

I am especially indebted to Robert D. Kirvel, who as a contributor to this catalogue, has conducted and edited a superbly insightful interview with Merion Estes. Merion and I had a great time collaborating on all aspects of this presentation. And finally, I thank Merion and her husband Tom Zimmerman, and my own husband Douglas Messerli, for their earnest moral support of this very inspiring and stirring project.

Howard N. Fox
May 2018

IN PARADISE

Howard N. Fox

Merion Estes is one of the most scintillating artists working today, creating some of the most visually euphoric, formally exuberant, wildly active landscapes—or mindscapes. Words like "joyous," "ecstatic," "rapturous," and "energetic" regularly pepper the formidable body of admiring critical literature that has grown up around her oeuvre since the mid-1970s. Her compositions are thrilling and aesthetically overwhelming. She pictures the natural world that we all live in as a fervid, fantastical habitat pulsing with a vitality that is nearly operatic in scale and force. Her art presents viewers with a world of desire. Further, her career-long engagement of large issues—stylistic, formal, and political, ranging from artistic invention to radical feminism, to environmental activism, and back again, always, to a fascination with painterly beauty—is striking in its range and depth of commitment.

Estes's techniques are as unusual as her compositions and their meanings are complex. To begin with, she does not paint on blank canvas, the standard for nearly all painters: rather, she paints on mass-manufactured printed fabrics from non-Western cultures—particularly contemporary African designs in recent years—that are among the most colorful and rambunctious designs most of us have ever encountered; and they boldly show through and around the images Estes applies upon their surfaces. Beyond that, she regularly incorporates fabric collage, stenciling, and photographic transfers into her works, all of which serve to activate her art with intense material pleasures. And, unlike the near-universal norm among painters in Western art, Estes shares an eclectic artistic vocabulary to produce an almost unfathomable world of divergent picture—half recognizable, half hallucinatory—that dance together in nearly conjugal unruliness.

Beyond all this, during her mature studio practice, Estes has always been an artistic rebel, a radical feminist, and an ardent ecological activist. While her aesthetic radicalism is readily apparent upon our first encounter with her paintings, her ingrained political and ecological issues may not disclose themselves upfront. But they indeed are there, finally shifting our first-glance delights with a sea change to troubled, ominous content that reflects our human misuse and plunder of nature

in ways that threaten our planetary health.

Estes's journey to her current body of work has lasted about five decades. Now eighty, and still relentlessly vital and determined, she has partaken in a career that has spanned the emergence of Los Angeles as a major art capital and continues to contribute to it with prodigious ambition and audacity. Indeed, the arc of her career has been always restless in bold expression, rich in content, and deeply engaged with external contexts.

> ***"her career has been always restless in bold expression"***

After receiving her bachelor of fine arts degree from the University of New Mexico in 1970, Estes enrolled in the master of fine arts program at the University of Colorado Boulder and began seriously exploring what were then "exotic"—that is, non-traditional—materials to make her art. But Estes, always a restless rebel, sought out such mediums as vinyl sheets, spray paint, and other industrially manufactured commercial mediums that were not only unfamiliar to the realms of so-called "fine" arts—the very field in which she received both her undergraduate and her graduate degrees—but were actively shunned by those academic disciplines. Except, that is, by twentieth-century avant-gardists, experimenters, and contrarians who had a long history of defying material, stylistic, and cultural norms; Estes saw herself as an activist advancing the contemporary avant-garde of the early 1970s.

What is more, she shunned the then-current "mandatory" use of rugged materials deployed by many well-established East Coast minimalists (almost all white males, like Richard Serra, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, and Donald Judd, for example) who worked in unorthodox mediums including railroad timbers, felt, fluorescent light fixtures, Cor-Ten steel, cast cement, and plywood. Their daring materialism might well have been an inspiration to the young Estes; however, there was a major shift in her focus, and that of a growing number of women artists on both coasts—who declared instead a preference, or rather a *principle,* to privilege more patently "feminine" materials and techniques such as

fabric, wicker, quilting, ceramic, embroidery, and weaving. If the male minimalists were boldly unorthodox in their use of macho industrial materials to challenge notions of "fine" art, the up-and-coming women's cohort challenged contemporary thinking about "fine" art by creating works that were more often associated with craft and traditional "women's work."

It's no surprise that this muscle-flexing by women within the art world mirrored the synchronous rise of modern-day feminism in American society at large. The feminist movement, which evolved side-by-side with the anti-Vietnam War and anti-draft campaigns, the nascent equal-rights and cultural pride drives by gay people, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Chicanos, and many other minorities, was deeply inspired by the Black civil rights movement of only a decade or two prior. American counterculture, whether politically oriented or lifestyle based—or both for many people affiliated with any of these causes—was ascendant. People were angry with America's squandered ideals and their sense of America's abandoned ideal*ism*. Women—who are not a minority or subsidiary group, but a *co-equal* populace—knew they were *un*equally perceived and *un*equally treated within American society and culture. They were disaffected citizens, and they took measures to right the situation. They marched in the streets; they ran for elective office; they proselytized in public debate. And, as artists, they worked privately in their studios to forge a collective awareness that they had productive, creative, and important capacities to play that might have little to do with the socially prevalent presumption that women's roles were child-bearing and housewifery to their husbands and family.

Artists such as Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago, Joyce Kozloff, Ree Morton, Valerie Jaudon—and even a few men, notably Kim MacConnel and Robert Zakanitch—generated a mode of artmaking that became known as Pattern and Decoration, or more casually as P&D. P&D embraced pure visual delight and a celebration of personal "indulgence" and permissiveness. These aesthetic traits were pointedly antithetical to the burden of being "rigorous"—*rigor* was a concept much revered and repeated among minimalists—and seemed to be far more

simpatico to viewers, even within the rarefied sphere of contemporary art. P&D artists gravitated towards, obviously, patterns—they might be vertical or horizontal rows or grids of repetitive designs and intervals, concentric circular arrangements of abstract or representational imagery, or other visually rhythmic compositions—and ornate adornment (though not necessarily fusty baroque embellishment) such as bright colors, pictorial themes, repeated motifs, nearly tactile textures, and a general visual free-play that were the antithesis of Minimalism with its monolithic and authoritarian control of unwieldy materials.

"people were angry with America's squandered ideals and their sense of America's abandoned idealism"

The *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter, reviewing the 2007 exhibition *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975-1985* at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, New York, described P&D as:

"...the last genuine art movement of the 20th century, which was also the first and only art movement of the postmodern era and may well prove to be the last art movement ever.

We don't do art movements anymore. We do brand names (Neo-Geo); we do promotional drives ("Painting is back!"); we do industry trends (art fairs, M.F.A. students at Chelsea galleries, etc.).... [But P&D] was the real thing. The artists were friends, friends of friends or students of friends. Most were painters, with distinctive styles but similar interests and experiences. All had had exposure to, if not immersion in, the liberation politics of the 1960s and early '70s, notably feminism. All were alienated by dominant movements like Minimalism.

They were also acutely aware of the universe of cultures that lay beyond or beneath Euro-American horizons, and of the alternative models they offered for art. Varieties of art from Asia, Africa and the

> Middle East, as well as folk traditions in the West, blurred distinctions between art and design, high and low, object and idea. They used abstract design as a primary form and ornament as an end in itself. They took beauty, whatever that meant, as a given." [1]

Indeed P&D opened vast new horizons for many artists—many who were not at all personally involved in the short-lived episode of P&D in postmodern art, but whose own artistic orientation was enlarged by artistic modes and global art traditions that advanced Western modernism had largely been blind to.

In general, within the modernist Western tradition of the twentieth century, patterning and decoration were dismissed as trivial aspects of visual art, mere distractions—or worse, cover-ups for a lack of "real" content. However beloved patterning and decoration might have been historically, for any self-respecting modernist they had become denigrated and shallow sideshows to "true" artistic aspiration. More related to non-"fine" art and craft, patterning and adornment became thought of in modernist sensibility as simple prettification, like the gingerbread gewgaws and curlicues embellishing much Victorian architecture. The marginalization of patterning and ornamentation by the modern avant-garde was an aesthetic and political declaration of artistic independence.

And so was its resuscitation in the early 1970s by the P&D artists. Although there was little overtly political subject matter in the art of the P&D movement, its very advent was inherently political and revolutionary in the context of the visual art of the day. Among its practitioners, P&D was considered a direct alternative—even an affront—to the hegemony of Minimalism. Moreover, P&D was promulgated primarily by women who audaciously chose mediums and modes that refuted not so much the *legitimacy* of the Minimalist mode as its *dominion* in American art. And it did so at a time when other social, political, and cultural assertions were not only inspiring many creative artists in all disciplines but were galvanizing broad public recognition.

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/15/arts/design/15patt.html

That is precisely when Merion Estes found her artistic footing. In 1972, after receiving her MFA from UC Boulder where she had experimented with sleek vinyl, spray paints, and industrial lacquers, she moved to Los Angeles, where there was an acclaimed community of artists including Robert Irwin, Larry Bell, Craig Kauffman, Peter Alexander, and Doug Wheeler, mostly congregating around the beach community of Venice. Their art was described by various observers as "California light-and-space art," the "L.A. look," and the "Fetish Finish" movement. The appeal of their example seemed inevitable for Estes, who admired their industrial-yet-ethereal materials such as vinyl, acrylic, and glass, and their spectral colors—so opposite to the opaque steel, cement, and plywood mediums of the East Coast Minimalists. However, if Estes was ever artistically engaged with the "Venice Boys," her focus shifted when she began articulating a feminist aesthetic and viewpoint in about 1973, and she soon diverged from their slick aesthetics of vinyl and lacquer. Further, she had joined with a number of like-minded activist women artists who were coalescing in downtown Los Angeles, to become a founding member of the only women's art cooperative, the Grandview Gallery, and a participant in the earliest embodiment of the Woman's Building, a nationally influential feminist art space and consciousness-raising workshop.

"patterning and decoration were dismissed as trivial aspects of visual art"

During the mid-1970s, she gradually permitted herself to become more "feminine" in her art—introducing landscape and marine motifs seemed more nurturing than the geometries and grids that had informed her earliest professional work. And her application of paint to her surfaces became more gestural, brushier, bordering on flamboyant. She even went so far as to deliberately push the bounds of "good taste" by sprinkling glitter over the surfaces of numerous works. At the same time she was evolving her studio practice, she also had a day job to pay the rent: she had a house-painting business through which she became something of a specialist in decorative interior painting such as hand-painted faux marble and woodgrain. One of her clients, so impressed with her skills, commissioned her to design a child's

fanciful bedroom; Estes festooned the walls with images of birds, flowers, tendrils, bees, butterflies, and a flurry of other decorative fronds and wisps. Pleased with her derring-do at her day job, the results emboldened her to incorporate similar imagery and flamboyance into her studio art. As independent curator Michael Duncan commented on this development, she opened "a rich and outrageous Pandora's Box, letting fly such sins against *intelligent good taste* as baby sparrows, stenciled daisies, and paper butterflies." [2]

Her early mature art, dating from about the mid-1970s, teems with joyous vitality: lifeforms such as individual cellular structures, jellyfish-like marine biota, floral shapes, groves of trees, and flocks of birds; and natural phenomena like rainstorms and sunsets. Her works from this period to 2006 are documented and discussed by curator Rebecca McGrew and artist/essayist Constance Mallinson in the catalogue to the 2006 exhibition, *A Sea of Possibilities: Paintings by Merion Estes 1971 to 2006,* published by the Pomona [California] College Museum of Art. This current exhibition and its catalogue pick up roughly where the Pomona project left off, comprising about twenty large-scale paintings and some half-dozen sculptures, mostly from Estes's more recent and decisively more trouble-tinged art. This is by no means a comprehensive show, but rather a core sampling of masterworks by Estes. But it does reveal that from the early 2000s Estes's art turned less lyrical and rather darker in mood.

As the subtitle of this exhibition suggests, *Merion Estes: Unnatural Disasters,* the backdrop for her recent art production has been man-made natural disasters such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010; the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant meltdown in Japan; the disastrous Hurricane Harvey floods in Houston in 2017 (widely believed by climatologists to be related to global warming); the disquieting melt rate of the Arctic ice pack; and, countless other signs that Earth's natural environment is being violated and damaged by human interference into our planet's natural behavior. Surely not all of nature's behavior might be favorable to the flora and fauna of the Earth—

[2] Michael Duncan, "Merion Estes' Alternate Universe: Shameless Pleasure in the Garden of Fancy," exhibition catalogue, 1998, Remba Gallery, Los Angeles.

earthquakes, volcanoes, and wildfires are certainly not kind to their victims—but it seems without a doubt (except to climate change deniers, who are like Holocaust deniers) that much human endeavor contributes to environmental upset, distortion, and possible catastrophe.

> ***"signs that Earth's natural environment is being violated and damaged by human interference"***

Adding to Estes's darker tenor are geopolitical reflections that many people throughout the world share, such as horrific memories of 9/11; of extended warfare across the Middle East and sectarian and racially motivated massacres in Asian countries; of sub-Saharan famine; and the growing disparity of wealth.

And too, there was Estes's own introspection. She was well into her sixth decade in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and, as befits any thoughtful person in her later years, she was reflecting on her personal history. It was not all a happy history, but one plagued by family strife in her childhood years, an early marriage forced on her by parents who were scandalized by her out-of-wedlock pregnancy and who threatened to disown her and send her to a home for unwed mothers, and an early divorce from her abusive husband. She subsequently married a bisexual man who ultimately entered into a permanent gay relationship. (Her split with her second husband Norm was amicable, and they continued to be friends; indeed, Norm became the partner of Robert D. Kirvel who conducted the interview with Estes in this catalogue.) Her marriage to Tom Zimmerman in 1986 continues to this day and is a source of great stability and joy in her life.

The visual splendor of Estes's art abides, but it is now yoked with a jarring aura of concern and urgency. Curator and literary historian Max F. Schulz has astutely focused on the inherent dualities that animate Estes's art, admonishing viewers to be equally mindful of the lurking menace that accompanies the visual extravaganza of her recent oeuvre. Of her resplendent 2003 painting ***Red Tide*** (pg. 16), for example, he mines the evidence of its title to reveal the work's import: "The painting depicts the yearly bloom of phytoplankton, a single-celled microor-

ganism, which reproduces daily through cellular division to create massive populations that can stretch over thirty miles in places. The extraordinary life force of this annual explosion of algae for several weeks or more each year on both California and New England coasts perversely sucks up the ocean's oxygen and blocks sunlight to its lower depths. The result is massive death of fish trapped in waters under the bloom. In addition, toxins in the algae accumulate in clams, scallops, and mussels, shellfish that filter seawater for food, making them deadly for humans to eat."[3]

> ***"the painting depicts the yearly bloom of phytoplankton, a single-celled microorganism"***

The exhilaration of Estes's earlier art is still there in full force in ***Red Tide***; but there is now an essential duality in her art. This duality raises considerable issues about Estes's aesthetic personal aims. Her latter-day iconography and images of recognizable natural objects like trees and oceans, animals, and man-made structures seem so stylized and codified as to function almost as a private, interiorized iconography. And while her subject matter and its message are as public as a political cartoon, their import and purport are often veiled or so indirect as to be inscrutable, illegible, even unfathomable. It is as if she scrums or camouflages the very reproachful message she is otherwise announcing with a bullhorn.

We may query if Estes is trying to add intellectual, political, and moral heft to what some observers have viewed as a celebration of purely formalistic and visual pleasure—or, as the most harsh critics of P&D had disdained as eye candy. This is a serious complication and challenge to Estes's oeuvre. But we must return to Estes's early professional history and her contribution to the development of P&D in the 1970s: for while the paintings, drawings, and tapestries of that movement were decidedly without overt political content, the *enterprise* or *project* of P&D was entirely freighted with political and ideological impulses. Estes's seriousness was there from the very start.

Estes has reflected that "the content is important to me. I think the beauty in

[3] Max F. Schulz, "Merion Estes: SeaEarthSkyscapes," in *Contemporary Soliloquies on the Natural World*, exhibition catalogue, 2005 USC Fisher Gallery, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

Red Tide, 2003
72 x 54 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic paint on printed fabric
Courtesy of the artist

all of [my works] is perhaps a seduction but also is part of the content in that the 'sublime' can be both terrible and beautiful and a reminder to be aware of what we have lost or are losing politically and environmentally.... For years I believe my work was too easily viewed as pretty and 'decorative' and dismissed accordingly except for a very few.... I've been waving the flag for beauty in art for a very long time. But not escapist beauty." [4]

> ***"the 'sublime' can be both terrible and beautiful"***

Merion Estes's paintings "are beautiful and difficult," states art historian Betty Ann Brown. "They maintain this apparently contradictory state precisely because the joy we feel through sight—the sheer visual delight derived from her unabashedly exuberant shapes and colors and textures—is tempered by the sorrow we also feel as we recognize the environmental devastation undermining the luxurious abundance of her scintillating surfaces. Estes skates across the tension between pleasure and pain as she negotiates clashes between nature and culture: lubricous masses pollute ocean depths; a helicopter crashes through a dense jungle; a deer stumbles, wounded, out of a darkening forest." [5]

Similarly, the artist and art writer Constance Mallinson notes that appreciating Estes's paintings requires not merely observing this contradiction but "embracing [the] paradox...: they are rapturously beautiful, employing dazzling aesthetics as they describe horrific events. Color can be vivid, bold, prismatic, glowing, and often subtly layered in absorbing, sensuous tonalities. Compositions are dynamic and innovative, swirling, undulating, and seducing. Natural forms enchant and delight in their endless shapes and characters. They simultaneously provoke, confound, and fascinate in a way that is nothing less than sublime, as she situates her viewers on the precarious brink of environmental collapse and annihilation." [6]

Estes herself answers this issue, in a disarmingly personal reply: "Some viewers have questioned my combining of visual beauty with dire subject matter but to me that encompasses the very dualities of life.... I don't wish to depict endless literal illustrations of these horrors but to draw the viewer in with the materials and vivid

[4] Unpublished email to the author, April 28, 2017. // [5] Betty Ann Brown, "Sublime Cataclysm: Merion Estes's *Lost Horizons*" in *Merion Estes: Lost Horizons*, exhibition catalogue, 2009, Galerie Anaïs, Santa Monica.

Smithereens, 2012
54 x 72½ in.
Fabric collage and acrylic paint on printed fabric
Collection of Kelly Boyer

[6] "Merion Estes" in *Dispatches from the Front Lines: Merion Estes*, privately published catalogue in conjunction with the exhibition of the same title, 2017, CB1 Gallery, Los Angeles.

patterns and color and then have the message become apparent. Having the ability to laugh and cry at the same time typifies my approach to life." [7] There isn't a much more complex or nuanced statement about personal experience – or the major global issues of today – than Merion Estes's statement of her artistic invitation to her viewers to laugh and cry with her.

"their eyes stare out at us like witnesses to a guilty misdeed"

The emotional range of her vision appears upfront in her art of the past few years. ***Smithereens*** (pg. 18) is one of numerous paintings she made in 2012 as a response to the Fukushima disaster. The surface is a visual explosion of energy: a latticework of flame-like reds and oranges suffuses the upper portion of the picture, as spider-like black spikes, evoking smoke and ash, interpenetrate the "flames." The lower portion depicts bulbous, swirling waves (they are pieces of printed fabric collaged onto the painting's surface), referencing the tsunami that destroyed the power plant and precipitated the nuclear catastrophe. The marine life that perished due to the disaster is represented by the dozens upon dozens of fish eyeballs staring out from the painting; those ocean inhabitants might well have survived the tsunami of the Fukushima disaster, but they did not survive the radiation and toxins released into their habitat. Their eyes stare out at us like witnesses to a guilty misdeed. Traversing the background is a bar of rising and falling vertical lines that represents, in a highly stylized mode, the skyline of Fukushima whose municipal life was profoundly disrupted by the calamity.

Hot Zone from 2011 (pg. 20) pictures a burning woodland. The background is a cloud of all-consuming, brightly glowing colors that are sickly and poisonous more than they are attractive—hideously blushing fuchsia, nauseous chartreuse, sulfurous and bilious yellows. The left foreground is dominated by a large burning bush (again, collaged from manufactured printed fabric, here with a flame motif), while in the right foreground stands a tree-like stickman whose arms are thrust into the air in alarm, fear, outrage, and, possibly, defeat.

One of Estes's most recent works, ***Cooling Trend*** (pg. 22), offers some relief

[7] Unpublished email from Merion Estes to Anna Katz, April 14, 2018. Katz is organizing an exhibition of P&D art for Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art to open in 2019.

Hot Zone, 2011
58 x 90 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic paint on printed fabric with photo transfer and spray paint
Courtesy of the artist

from our human pillage of nature—or at least a *hope* of some relief. A vividly hot, deep background featuring multiple suns radiating intense heat is the visual and conceptual foundation of the scenario. The foreground shows a swarm of toothy, fire-breathing dragons out to do lasting harm in their path; they are flanked by flocks of jet-black ravens, harbingers of death. (The dragons and ravens were spray-painted with cut stencils.) Strangely—miraculously—an undulating broad streak of cool, moist air, represented by wavy lines, and densely populated with what might be fish or sperms or raindrops, wafts through the large-scale picture. Estes made this work responding to the previous year's being the hottest ever recorded globally, and she describes the river-like streak as "a cool ribbon of hope in an otherwise fiery 'sky'." [8]

> ***"a cool ribbon of hope in an otherwise fiery 'sky'"***

Considering Estes's pervasive dizzying, rowdy, visual whirlwinds, it might seem surprising to suggest an affinity in her art with a vastly different tradition: what is sometimes known as America's "Native School" of nineteenth-century landscape painting. The majesty and grandeur, the often literal (and just-as-often fantastical) realism of American landscape painting during our country's most expansionist age, could not be farther from Estes's wildly abstract forms. Yet that affinity is real, albeit not artistic: it is attitudinal and philosophical.

Art historians have generally stressed the American landscape tradition's independence from the conceits and aesthetic conventions of European landscape painting—especially American artists' portrayal of the apparently infinite vastness of the American wilderness. Ours was a land not manicured and tamed by human habitation (as was the norm in much European landscape art), nor yet cultivated for agrarian industry, nor scattered with villages or man-made habitats. "Native School" American landscape painters reveal a more authentic and a more *natural* state of the New World.

European landscape painting usually depicted evidence of human habitation as embedded in the land since ancient times. But then, as the American art historian

[8] Unpublished email from Merion Estes to the author, April 27, 2018.

Cooling Trend, 2017
86 x 111 in.
Fabric collage and spray paint on canvas
Courtesy of the artist

John Thomas Flexner has observed, "[t]here was American nature, which was *truly* beautiful and, according to some ideas of high romanticism, more elevating than the European because in its wildness it was closer to God. And there was *American* man, envisioned as neither a toady to aristocrats nor an aristocrat enslaved by artificial vices, but a *natural* exemplar of nature's inborn goodness [italic emphasis added]…. In changing [landscape painting] from a luxury for a few to a friend of the many, American painting espoused the most serious beliefs of the people: optimism, the identification of God with Nature, a love of childhood, a wholesomeness of attitude, and a purity of intention that made much European painting of the time seem—as Americans wrote—frivolous and lascivious, calculated to inspire dilettantism and the darker passions…. And American optimism felt most secure in its adoration of the world God, not man, had made." [9]

Americans enjoy a heritage, a received culture, concerning the natural world. Whether we believe that nature is the beneficent gift of an omnipotent and fatherly God who crafted the Creation over a six-day span, or alternatively that the universe is the inevitable and instant physical result of The Big Bang in which *nothingness* suddenly became *something,* our world exists and is sufficient unto itself. In either scenario, divine or materially inevitable, nature is providence, "*provide*-ence." In the American imagination, and in Native American beliefs, nature preceded humans and is eternal and primordial, ever ancient and ever new. Estes is fond of relating how she discovered—*really* encountered—nature for the first time when she moved to New Mexico as a college student. The sun, the sky, the desert, the mountains, the lightning storms instilled in her a profound sense of nature's sublimity.

This uniquely New World environment of nearly unlimited natural providence, along with European settlers' belief in their God-given sanction to fulfill their desire for personal plenteousness and financial privilege, catalyzed a huge wave of development to exploit nature for human gain. Today it appears to us that within the nineteenth-century ethos of Manifest Destiny, which justified and propelled the Europeans' conquest of New World native civilizations and nature, there was little

[9] John Thomas Flexner, *That Wilder Image: The Painting of America's Native School from Thomas Cole to Winslow Homer* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970), 292, 294, 296.

to caution against the wanton recklessness and opportunism.

Regrettably, we humans among all the creatures who inhabit Earth seem to be the only ones who can willfully tinker with, upset, exploit, sabotage, or ravage our planet. Merion Estes's art gives vital form to her fear and anger that America's historic idealization of nature's sublimity, its inborn pristineness, its perpetuity, are being plundered and bludgeoned out of existence by our latter-day environmental policies shaped by myopia and profit motives. Admittedly, her art looks nothing at all like nineteenth-century American landscape painting; but it shares many of the same values, namely a reverence for the sanctity of nature's original state.

> ***"blurring the boundaries between mass-produced and painted imagery"***

There are other art historical relationships as well. Painting on manufactured, mass-produced, store-bought fabric is one of the most salient and evocative aspects of Estes's art. Any painter can paint—and most do—on blank canvas; Estes elects to paint on an agitated surface with its own robust visual life, and she grants these wildly designed fabrics great latitude in her creative process. Further, the printed fabrics themselves have a deep affinity with Pop Art and its inherent political/populist/revolutionary leanings and they provide an art historical link with the Dada and Surrealist challenge to established cultural and societal norms. Indeed, Estes declares that she is intent on "blurring the boundaries between mass-produced and painted imagery," which "suggests an intricate interweaving, interrelationship and tension between the personal, metaphysical, and ubiquitous cultural influences." [10]

Beyond her intellectual affinities with "Native School" American landscape painting, Estes imbues her very idiosyncratic art with technical aspects that serve as metaphors for the natural world. The "landscapes" of collaged art objects made of paint, fabric, and photographic transfers are—like the actual biosphere they depict—a vastly complex and exquisitely balanced linkage of visual forms analogous to the myriad chemical elements, metabolic and species-specific interactions, and particularized environmental conditions that support an astonishing array of lifeforms, all of which

[10] Unpublished email from Merion Estes to the author, April 27, 2017.

are reliant for their very existence as species on one another's existence. Indeed, the biome of Estes's natural world is not at all hierarchical: it is a webwork of mutual dependence and interactivity. And a menace to any facet of it is a threat to the survival of the whole.

Indeed, Estes's art—observed as a decades-long oeuvre, as a unique studio practice, as an original aesthetic, and as an ethical commitment to her personal ideals—is a deeply complex interrelated matrix. The most significant keystone of her art is the interrelationship of her feminism and her eco-activism. We can certainly comprehend the contested relationship between nature and human culture—the question of "nature versus nurture" has a long and long-argued history. But why the fusion of feminism and ecological activism?

In Western civilization the issue of male control over nature and over woman is writ clearly in the origin myth of the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament, which specifically describes the first-created woman and "help meet" [i.e., *helpmate*] as a virtual byproduct, formed from a rib bone (Genesis 2:22) of the first-created male. God tells them to "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing..." (Genesis 1:28).

The author of Genesis wrote that God entitled Adam and his helpmate Eve to "subdue"—i.e., to manipulate—the diversity of living creatures of God's creation for mankind's own purpose. Over the millennia since the authorship of Genesis, generation after generation of mankind's husbandry of the natural world has come to equate the notion of *subduing* with humankind's subjugation, exploitation, and overlording nature. Any connotation of *stewardship* and care for nature (if that connotation had ever been intended by the author of Genesis) has come to indicate subservience to partialities of human convenience, appetite, and, especially, corporate profitability on a global scale.

Still, how is it that our greedy usurpation of finite natural resources assumes specifically feminist undercurrents and overtones? The indicators are deeply

embedded in world cultures. In many civilizations, over the centuries, men have been the traditional hunter/gatherers, the agriculturalists, the warrior/protectors, the industrialists and capitalists, and the primary governors of society and—in fact, the *dominators.* Women, by contrast, have been the traditional child bearers and attendants, the family caretakers and feeders, the domestics and distaffs—in fact, the *helpmates.* The men's dominant role was clearly established, as was the women's subservient role, however integral; woman was plainly the lesser of two equals. The planet Earth, like the women who inhabit it, has been historically subjugated to the rule of men. And we are all, male, female, and Earth itself, at peril of social, biological and ecological unmaking by that exploitative mindset of values.

> ***"her art is the interrelationship of her feminism and her eco-activism"***

Estes's artworks are indeed, in some broadly defined genre, landscapes. But they are also what we might call "mindscapes"—visual expressions of one artist's inner life that aspire to assert a life of their own in the real world. The *Oxford Online Living Dictionary* defines "mindscape" as "The range of a person's thoughts and imagination, regarded as a panorama capable of being contemplated by another person; mental landscape or inner vision." [11] And as much as Estes's art is a vision of the external world we all cohabit, it is also her own hinted-at personal history. Whatever its roots in public feminist and ecological activism, hers is also a very personal art.

For all its appearance of giddy joyousness, there's a melancholic undercurrent in Estes's oeuvre. Her art embodies a deep private grief. Reflecting on her personal history, Estes has written that "my early experience as a female shaped everything to come. It was barbaric and cruel. I guess as the oldest of four and a girl, I was recruited very early into being mother's little helper. I certainly felt protective towards my younger set of siblings! I felt sorry for them. The outrage I felt growing up in my family was no doubt transferred later to other outsiders and disadvantaged people." [12]

In the final analysis, Estes's feminist outlook represents not only her astute engagement of major sociopolitical issues of the 1960s and '70s, but also reflects

[11] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mindscape // [12] Unpublished email to the author, April 19, 2018.

an inner attempt to deal with her stern family life as a teenager, an abusive early marriage that ended in divorce, and her later estrangement from her grown children. Her principled focus on ecological issues of paramount importance to the survival of life on Earth may echo a mindset formed during her troubled youth. Throughout her career, Estes has manifested a deep-rooted sense of injustice. In private conversation, she frankly suggests as much; and in her art she exposes a life-giving and life-sustaining world under attack from uncaring self-interests. The individual causes and effects of these concerns may have separate origins in Estes's background; but it is the genius of human ideation to be able to relate (even subconsciously) disparate sources of experience into a coherent zeitgeist, or world picture.

> ***"Earth, like the women who inhabit it, has been historically subjugated to the rule of men"***

Merion Estes's artistic achievement reads as a metaphorical love letter both from and to a troubled paradise.

Storm Watch, 2003
80 x 60 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic
paint on printed fabric
Courtesy of the artist

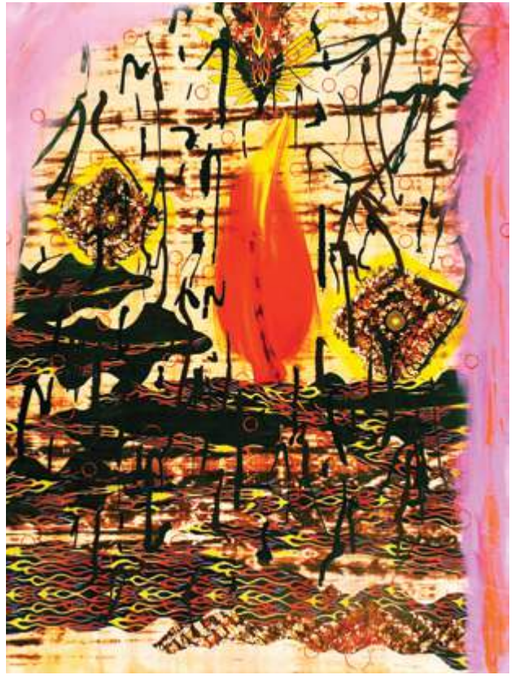
Dia de los muertos, 2011
48 x 72 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic
paint on printed fabric
Collection of Tom Zimmerman

Collateral Damage, 2012
55 x 79½ in.
Fabric collage and acrylic paint on printed fabric with photo transfer
Courtesy of the artist

Desolation Row, 2013
63 x 80 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic paint on printed fabric
Courtesy of the artist

Neptune's Revenge, 2015
96 x 120 in.
(right) detail
Fabric collage and acrylic paint
on printed fabric with glitter
Collection of Paul Rosenberg

Melancholia, 2012
58 x 81 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic
paint on printed fabric
Collection of Karla Kraus

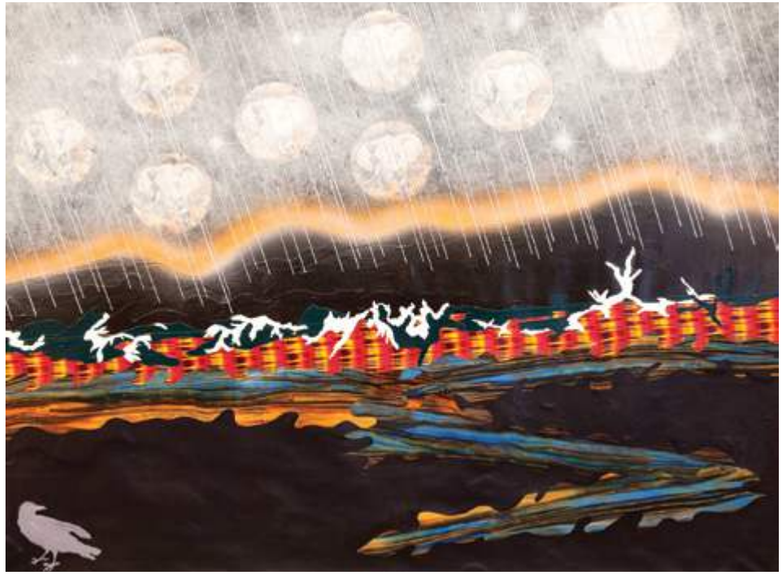


Oil and Water, 2006
80 x 60 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic paint
and oil paint on printed fabric
Courtesy of the artist

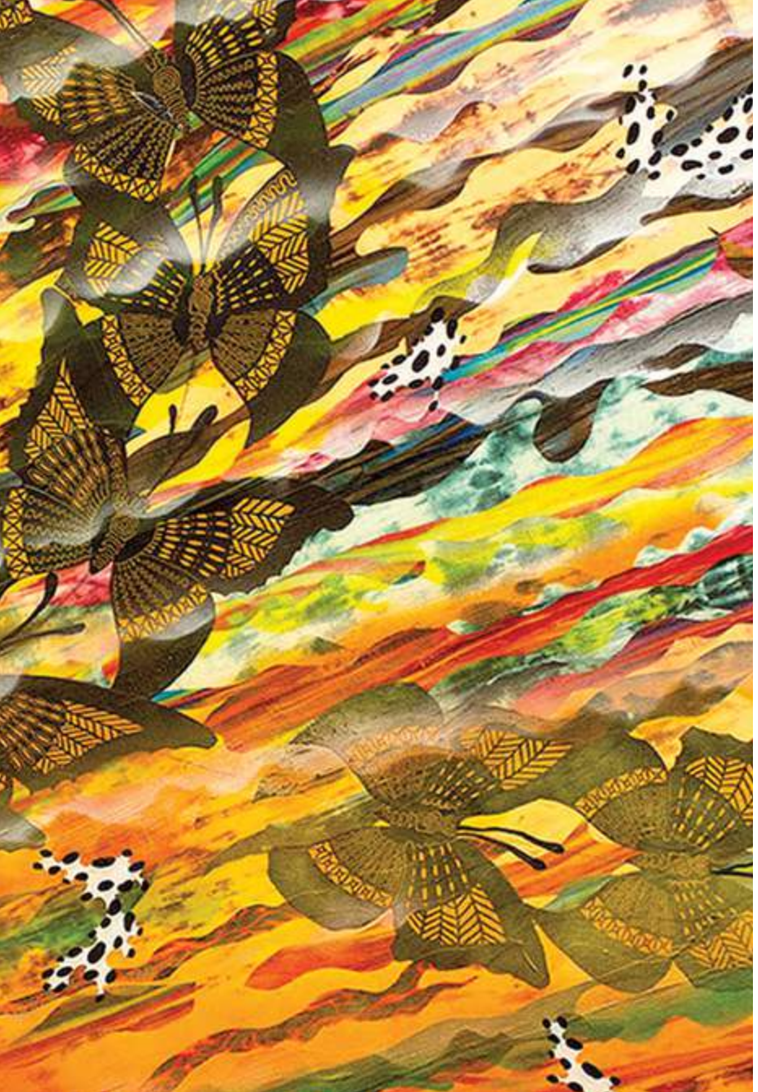
Undercurrents, 2003
54 x 72 in.
(left) detail
Fabric collage and acrylic paint on printed fabric
Courtesy of the artist

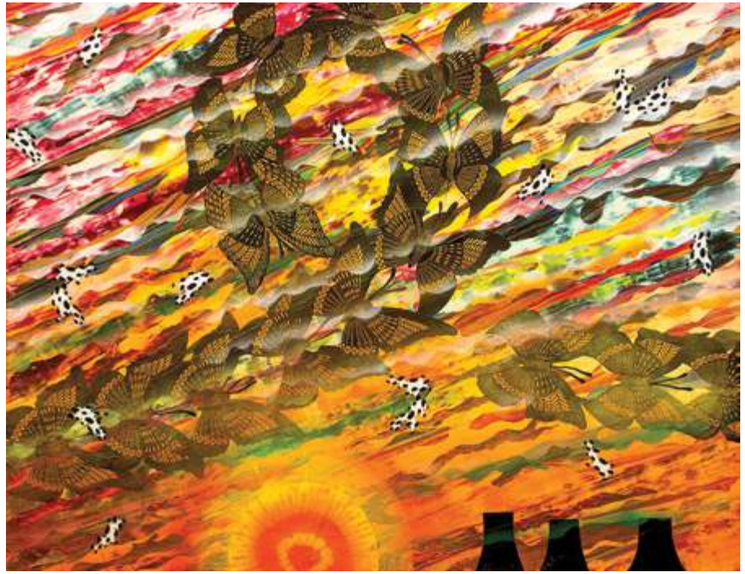
Toxic Depths, 2004
80 x 60 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic
paint on printed fabric
Courtesy of the artist

Too Many Teardrops, 2006
80 x 60 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic
paint on printed fabric
Courtesy of the artist

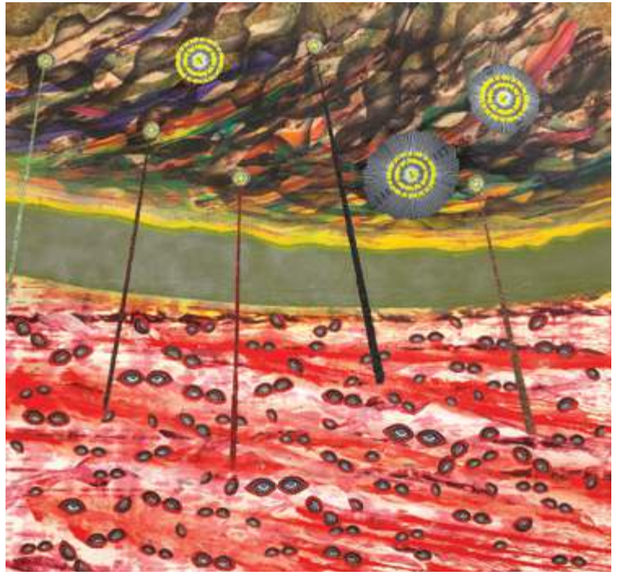


Memento Mori, 2014
64 x 88 in.
(right) detail
Fabric collage and acrylic
paint on printed fabric
Courtesy of the artist

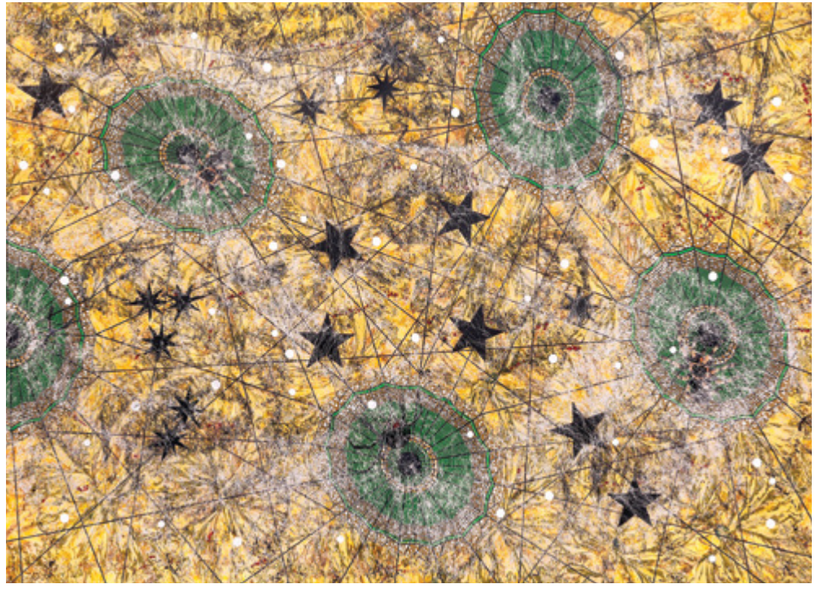




Los Alamos Sunset, 2014
62½ x 79½ in.
(left) detail
Fabric collage and acrylic paint on printed fabric
Courtesy of the artist



Fire Power, 2014
64 x 69 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic paint
on printed fabric with glitter
Courtesy of the artist



Black Star, 2016
61 x 87 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic paint on
printed fabric with photo transfers
Courtesy of the artist

Solar Burn, 1997
54 x 64 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic
paint on printed fabric
Collection of Tom Zimmerman

Strange Fruit, 2006
80 x 60 in.
Fabric collage and acrylic
paint on printed fabric
Courtesy of the artist

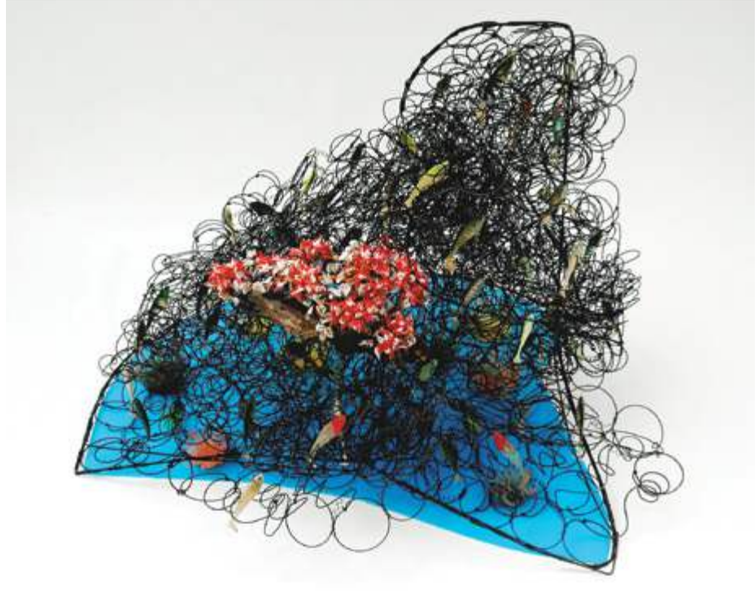
Bee, 2001–02
30 x 12 in.
Wax dipped purchased metal bee
and wax dipped silk flowers
Courtesy of the artist

Moon Garden, 2001–02
12 x 48 in.
Glass bulbs, polystyrene, iridescent acrylic
paint, hot glue, wood dowels, and silk fringe
Courtesy of the artist

Angel's Trumpet, 2001–02
47 x 23 in.
Wood, metal, yarn, plastic
Courtesy of the artist

Fruitless, 2005
48 x 24 in. (approximate)
Yarn-wrapped wood, found antlers,
found plastic-wrapped balls
Courtesy of the artist

Pink Lady, 2001–02
47 x 23 in.
Fiberglass-covered wicker finished in Marmorino (synthetic faux plaster wall finish) and silk flower
Courtesy of the artist



Dumpster Dive, 2006
36 x 48 in. (approximate)
Found wire, fishing lures, found shell sculpture, acrylic base
Courtesy of the artist

Butterfly, 2001–02
36 x 12 in.
Wax dipped purchased metal butterfly, twine wrapped wood dipped in wax with faux jewels
Courtesy of the artist

Visitation, 2001–02
36 x 36 in. (approximate)
Wood root, paint, and found orange butterflies
Courtesy of the artist

interview
with Merion Estes

Robert D. Kirvel

Merion in her studio with Miles, 1999
Photo: Tom Zimmerman

Note: The following interview is the product of one-on-one conversations between Merion Estes (see plain text, below) and Robert Kirvel (boldface text) during February and March 2018, supplemented by text messages, e-mails, and phone conversations.

Robert D. Kirvel is a two-time Pushcart Prize awardee and Best of the Net nominee for fiction, and a long-time friend of Merion Estes. His awards include the Chautauqua 2017 Editor's Prize for an essay; the 2016 Fulton Prize for the Short Story; and a 2015 ArtPrize for creative nonfiction. He has published in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Germany, and in two dozen literary journals in the United States. A collection of twenty-two interrelated stories is slated for issue in London by Eyewear Publishing in 2018. Most of his literary works are linked at https://twitter.com/Rkirvel.

Many have commented on a lifelong obsession, apparent over your five-decade career, with what I would characterize as a hyperconsciousness of the complex nature of beauty. In your art, the beauty can come from nature or unexpected sources. In this interview, one measure of success might be an enhanced appreciation, on the part of a reader, not just for your expressive art itself but also for some of the influences underlying your choices as an artist. In keeping with that objective, let's start with the earliest experiences that shaped your career in either a positive or negative way.

I was born in Salt Lake City in 1938 and relocated to San Diego at age four. At that time, my mother was a housewife, and my father worked for *The San Diego Union* as a reporter, which gave him an exemption from military service.

After being home-schooled during the ages of seven and eight as a result of rheumatic fever, I ended up feeling isolated—or in adult terms you might say poorly socialized. When I became pregnant with the first of my three children shortly after turning seventeen, I was kicked out of school, then out of the house, and shamed by family members into marrying someone I hardly knew. Neither of us was prepared for parenthood or married life, so, needless to say, the vows did not work out well.

This all took place in the mid-1950s, and given the mores of the time, I thought life was going to mean being stuck in an unhappy situation. You have to understand the laws about female reproductive freedom were very strict back then, and I experienced what might be considered a form of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. I don't want to sound like a victim here, but I will say that as a financially strapped and soon-to-be-single mother eventually putting herself through college with children ages one, three, and seven, life wasn't easy.

“by the age of fourteen, I declared myself an artist, reinforced by the results of an aptitude test”

I’m interested in how artists come to the realization they want a career in art in the first place. I suppose the decision could be made suddenly or gradually over time, but how did it happen for you?

I think a preference for art usually happens at a fairly young age, or at least it did for me. Not everyone can handle the isolation and solitude that come with art as a career decision. As important are the pre-requisites of ambition and drive.

Even at an early age I liked to lose myself in home projects of my own making, such as an invented game of “artist” with my younger brother using a toy telephone to take orders from imaginary clients or copying photos from a calendar. I developed a strong relationship with my first important teacher while being home-schooled. She took me on a field trip to San Diego’s Chinatown and helped me create a handmade book I illustrated. It included the story of my visit, a Chinese poem, and was bound with a beautiful piece of Chinese wrapping paper, all of which felt quite exotic.

By the age of fourteen, I declared myself an artist, reinforced by the results of an aptitude test. After transferring to a new high school as a junior, I met my most influential school teacher. In addition to painting, I fell in love with art history, joined the school’s art club, and won a national art contest. I begged my parents to allow me to take a summer painting course my teacher taught for adults in Balboa Park, and they finally relented after I threw a screaming fit about how my brother always got his way but not me. It worked.

You mentioned going back to school despite pressures on the home front having more to do with family than academia. What was the motivation to enroll in college?

The courage to go to college came when I read about my high school

teacher being named chairperson of a tiny, new art department near my home. After enrolling I often worked all night on projects and papers and was named the Most Valuable Student during my last year, which helped with the self-esteem issue. I attribute much of my drive and work ethic to a kind of rebound that happened in college after being a rebellious teen.

The art history and foundation classes necessary for learning to be an artist remain the best courses of concentrated study I've ever experienced. The curriculum was quite demanding and based on the one at University of California, Berkeley. I was particularly lucky to have a female mentor at an early stage, and it made a huge difference for me as a high school dropout re-entering school at age twenty-four. I can honestly say art and Ms. Hyde saved me.

You earned your college degrees after migrating from San Diego to New Mexico and then Colorado, both states with mountainous and arid terrain that can make powerful impressions. I know they did for me. Did you have similar reactions?

I really did. I earned a BA degree at the University of New Mexico in 1970, where the light and landscape were dazzling, then was offered a scholarship for graduate work leading to an MFA at the University of Colorado in Boulder, also in stunning terrain.

So the terrain and atmosphere had a positive effect on your work?

When I look back, I realize the importance of "place" as a major influence on my work. After four years of that awesome New Mexico sky and landscape, when I arrived in Colorado I changed my work to reflect that experience. I applied large, spray-painted and grid-based fields of four-inch circles containing chevrons and stripes onto clear, flexible vinyl sheets. During my second year of grad school, I resolved certain technical challenges associated with work that would occupy me for the next decade.

Tell us more about the technical development and specific challenges in format and effect you were trying to overcome.

Some pieces were huge, ranging up to eighteen-feet wide and eight-feet high. I experimented with layers of painted-vinyl sheets that moved in air currents, creating a moiré pattern as a viewer passed by. The concept was to create ethereal and shimmering pieces of dazzling beauty that would engulf a viewer and provide a meditative and life-enhancing experience, as well—something like visitors entering an ornate church and being overwhelmed by the experience. I loved the visual effect of hundreds of massed circles, and I also referenced the Western landscape through color choices and inspiration drawn from Southwest Native American textiles and crafts. So once again, time and place were important influences.

Critical ideas at the time were circulating about the death of painting, and many artists were experimenting with alternatives. Thanks to art magazines and critical seminars, I was struck by the work of Sam Gilliam, Eva Hesse, and the grids of Agnes Martin, as well as a group of counter-culture artists exploring metaphysical aspects of non-objective pattern paintings, doubtless influenced by perception-enhancing drugs.

When I showed some slides of my early work several years ago, a student asked if I did a lot of acid when I was young. The answer is, no.

You're smiling. So no LSD was involved, but ...?

Yes, well, I had a lot of potent pot.

Who were your principal mentors back in college?

At the University of New Mexico, Frederick Hammersley was highly encouraging, and a painter from London's Slade School of Fine Art, Bernard Cohen, had a residency. Both he and I were taken by the atmospheric

intensity of New Mexico and Native American art in particular. At the University of Colorado in Boulder, my thesis chair and a main influence was George Woodman. His graduate seminars were excellent, as was Boulder's art department in general.

Before going into more detail about your work after leaving grad school, and with your permission, I'm going to suggest an excursion into even more personal territory. It might also give readers some insight into the connection you and I share.

(Laughing) OK. But it's all a bit scandalous.

You've never been one to shy away from a scandal as far as I can tell.

No; I'll take it as a compliment. Of course you're talking about Norm Estes.

I am. Please take it from there.

Norm and I were physically together for nearly eight years, then after our separation he continued to provide for and help raise my children. After nine years of struggling through school, I felt it imperative to continue pursuing my artwork even while working a split shift at the local phone company. I was nearly penniless at the time, and the influence of poverty in my life then and later can't really be overstated.

Norm was a bigger-than-life character everyone adored. He was wildly unconventional—even by the standards of the mid-1960s and '70s—filled with contradictions, impulsive, hysterically funny, politically radical, autocratic, bisexual, kind, irresponsible, and heartbreaking.

I'll interrupt here just to say I agree with every one of those descriptors of the person I knew well too. I also saw a major part of your connection with Norm as being attributable to a sense of humor you both shared.

He really rescued my kids and me in late 1966 while I was stuck in the country outside Albuquerque waiting for school to start. I'd just arrived

"a female rebel consumed with ambition to prove folks from my early days wrong about how my life would turn out"

and was living with my nineteen-year-old sister and my three kids, ages four to ten, in a two-bedroom house normally used as a rental by my parents.

One day I got a call from my gay best friend from Grossmont College in San Diego who had met Norm in San Francisco and thought we should meet. At the time, Norm was a VISTA [Volunteers in Service to America, a United States domestic program, modeled on the international Peace Corps, to eliminate poverty] volunteer in a Spanish-speaking village in northern New Mexico, and he was soon to be a supervisor of new volunteers in that impoverished area. He had befriended a few of the local Brown Power activists in the north and become good friends and fellow activists with a couple of them.

Norm opened up the world to me as a female rebel consumed with ambition to prove folks from my early days wrong about how my life would turn out. He put me through four years of school, and he willingly moved to accommodate my opportunities to continue an art education, boosted by a scholarship to the University of Colorado. After that, we moved to Los Angeles to pursue my career, in part because New York was out of the question given our financial situation.

And then the two of you divorced.

Our differences finally became insurmountable. The ending resembled a train wreck, injuring everyone, in contrast to my current husband, Tom Zimmerman, who is a rock in all the ways that count. I can hardly overstate Tom's contributions to my professional career and his steadfastness in our personal relationship.

The punch line, of course, is that Norm and I subsequently lived together, and he became my soul mate for the last 20 years of his life. He was as remarkable as you describe him, and the reason I met you quite a few years ago.

So after graduate school, you made the move to Southern California. What was it like to return to the West Coast?

I moved to Los Angeles in 1972 seeking people who shared or could advance my artistic sensibilities along with those in the burgeoning feminist art movement, and my ardent feminism really took off at about the time of that move. The first Woman's Building opened on Grandview Avenue near downtown L.A., and it featured three galleries, the Feminist Studio Workshop, and other businesses. They were the first places I met women artists, and the openings were mobbed. I joined a co-op gallery where I had a solo show. The dialogue among women at various stages of their careers was stimulating in L.A. and influenced me to push "feminine" aspects of my work even more, including color choices and curtain-like effects. A post-grad seminar in feminist art theory was especially interesting to me after a completely male-oriented education and art history texts with no women in them. Most of my work continued to refer generally to landscape, as well as seascapes, and in 1979 the Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Park gave me a five-year retrospective of the vinyl work, leading to an arguably naïve expectation that my career was finally launched.

After that, I decided to drop some of the more toxic materials I'd been using, such as spray auto lacquer, and began a series of small works on paper often involving repeated, ornate shapes. I wanted to push the limits of "taste," so I incorporated reflective paint and glitter among other unconventional elements, with paint whipped on the surface as a precursor to an approach I've used the last twenty years, amounting to a seemingly accidental application of paint. The shapes themselves evolved over time into plant and flower forms.

I think one of the first times I visited you was when you were living in a seedy area of downtown Los Angeles. What was your life like at that time, and from what

sources were you drawing inspiration?

I moved to a gritty neighborhood in downtown L.A., where skid row was right outside the door. I recall being impressed by all the glass-bottle shards scattered everywhere, lively Latino businesses and shoppers, and an oasis of beauty in the wholesale flower market. The environment—like much of L.A. in general—was a study in contrasts and a source of inspiration as my new pattern paintings evolved. I made the pictures as rhythmic, jazzy, sexy, and over-the-top as I could, pushing the rules again and incorporating "debased" materials like glass bits, beads, fake flowers, and seasonal kitsch so abundant in the downtown shops.

One neighborhood sold tons of fabrics, some quite ridiculous, but the question for me is: who says such things can't be used, and why is the decorative aesthetic necessarily a bad thing? I think the answer has to do with our culture's Puritan heritage, and an emphasis on Marcel Duchamp and dour European Marxists spreading their influence through academia in the art world. But today, I still go back to that downtown L.A. district for fabric and inspiration.

The mid- to late-1970s was a memorable time for many of us because of the various movements taking place in liberation politics and the arts. What is your take on that tumultuous era of engagement, and to what extent were you a participant?

Well, I have to go back even farther than the '70s. Growing up with a newspaper reporter for a father and his reporter friends, I was always interested in politics. I read the more radical columnists and remember being upset when my folks voted for Eisenhower. In the early '60s, as the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam War heated up, just seeing the news on TV every night was radicalizing, and by 1963 in San Diego, I was angry. Like so many others, I felt sheltered from the realities of race in suburban California,

Merion in front of *Pino's Paradise*, 1981
Photo: Tom Zimmerman

aware of bias of course, but it seemed class-based looking back. San Diego had a big Latino population, and one of my good school friends was an immigrant from Cuba, but black neighborhoods were pretty far away. When television showed scenes of police brutality in the southern U.S., I felt deeply shocked.

With three children to look after, I suppose there was little you could do to express your anger.

I ended up volunteering one summer to make posters for the local chapter of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality, a civil rights advocacy organization]. With the babies at home, it was at least something I could do along with attending some meetings. In Albuquerque, I demonstrated against the war and remember standing in my doorway with a friend as tanks rolled down the street. Then with the rumblings about a feminist movement, a male teacher recommended the Betty Friedan book [*The Feminine Mystique,* 1963], and feminism became my main interest and involvement in activism through the '70s. It has affected me deeply ever since.

The feminist movement extended to art theory and creativity, as well, so who were some of the players at the time who influenced your thinking and creative direction?

I think a flowering of amazingly diverse post-modernist work was influenced by feminist art theory and practice, and it valued personal experience. Some writers used the term "pattern and decoration" to describe a movement influenced by artists such as Jennifer Bartlett, Joyce Kozloff, and Pat Steir, and initiated by feminists such as Miriam Schapiro. The work celebrated diversity and visual generosity, at the same time questioning the sanctity of "high art." The anti-minimalism art challenged formalist strictures or the idea of correctness, felt beyond the reach of corporate

America, and drew from many other cultures, fabric designs, crafts, as well as folk and outsider art.

Many women artists were active in the movement, which ran a relatively short course and then faded from critical favor to be replaced by a macho-infused, neo-expressionist movement of the early '80s. I wondered, where had all the women painters gone? I also felt I'd exhausted the limited terrain of gridded, glittered-pattern paintings. So I began experimenting with an application of fabric flowers and leaves to the surface of paintings, sometimes with painted leaves as brush strokes. These, by the way, were the seeds of my first sculptures in 2001, and such organic forms might be said to foreshadow later, more direct references to nature and landscape. I also returned for a time to small-scale work and a series of paintings on paper.

Then you turned to some larger nature-based paintings in the 1980s, with landscape imagery serving as a sort of metaphor then and later in the 1990s. Is that fair to say?

It is. Landscape as subject was neither modernist nor post-modernist, but given my frame of mind and struggling career at the time, I decided to paint what would most sustain my interest. Many of the scenes were painted with a deliberately lush and sumptuous use of oil paint, rather than acrylic, which enriched the paintings. This effort led me to break down the "big picture" into abstracted details drawn from my ever-expanding nature files. All the paintings in this semi-hallucinogenic series included circular or oval inserts containing "magnified" views of nature. The idea was to couple detail with the big picture and suggest an individual confronting larger issues about our relation with nature and its prettified and unreal depictions.

“I wanted to work on the edge of abstraction conjoined with representation”

A new series resulted in the ‘90s in the format of two- by three-foot panels in groupings of two or three. Some of these replicated the oval and circular inserts found in the large landscape paintings of the late 1980s. Once again, they tended to be examinations of life exemplified by nature’s varied forms drawn from my archive of cellular, planetary, fire, water, floral, sea-life, insect, and celestial imagery. I wanted to work on the edge of abstraction conjoined with representation. They were like still-camera detail shots with multiple images placed together. I was smitten with David Lynch’s film *Blue Velvet* at the time and had a large show at the Daniel Saxon Gallery in L.A. You might describe this as a transitional series notable for my reintroduction of pure abstraction to figural elements and for breaking down the big picture.

You sometimes refer to your nature archive or “image bank.” Readers might like to hear what you mean by that.

I found and filed images that caught my eye while culling through hundreds of nature photos from magazines and other sources. They included images from photographs, nature calendars, postcards, seed catalogs, and the like; and I started to see similarities in the forms when reference scale was removed. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson and others, it seemed apparent to me that the smallest detail could represent the universe, and I began to view the world differently—an awakening of consciousness so to speak, if that doesn’t sound too sappy.

No, not sappy at all. I’d say rather philosophical. Go on.

I then moved to another series of fourteen- by ten-inch acrylic and oils on wood panels called *Soundings* that were on display at the Jan Baum Gallery and at Barnsdall Park in a 1994 show titled *Current Abstraction: Illusions of Reality.* I wanted to improvise and experiment with every

possible way of applying paint. The process involved merging classical and improvisational forms along with a huge range of techniques, including drips, pours, feathering, striations, brushwork, and sanding to name a few. Late in the series, I began to apply a layer of painted fabric to the surface to start the process.

You then returned to larger versions of such works in the mid-1990s, starting with a base of fabric. And your use of preprinted, decorative fabric generally increased, isn't that right?

Yes. The fabrics incorporated polka dots, floral, or foliage patterns, but the technique remained much the same, combining accidental effects with carefully applied, painted or drawn regions. In the late '90s, I started adding cutout fabric shapes collaged onto the surface, increasing visual complexity. Over time, the areas of paint diminished, and areas of detailed fabric collage expanded, giving me a sense of greater artistic freedom.

In the late '90s, I discovered sources for African-inspired prints from Holland. These enriched the detail in my paintings and expanded my vocabulary. Found fabrics from a culture whose art forms and designs also reference nature was serendipitous and a perfect match to my interests and the forms I was already using. The material included clamshells, fertility symbols, abstract stream and sea creatures, birds, weird plant forms, and many others. These prints have now been commercialized and have lost their value as cultural products.

Around 2000, I added more overt content in response to the Bush regime and my horror of his wars for oil. Images of burning oil fields prompted me to include some of the more dire assaults on the environment because of an unending drive for oil profits.

Art by women artists accounts for something on the order of five percent of the work on display in national galleries and museums [estimated by a PBS NewsHour broadcast, February 2018]. Tell us about your reactions to that statistic, which is fairly shocking if you think about it, and your involvement in feminism.

It's really an outrage. My feminism arose from what I felt to be oppressive personal and family experiences in my youth, which is the case for many women. In essence, I spent the years between high school and college trying to educate myself by reading voraciously, mostly fiction, psychology, and politics. Reading *The Second Sex* [Simone de Beauvoir, 1949] at age twenty-two changed my life, but then I had already felt trapped and angry by then.

In keeping with what soon became known as consciousness-raising during the late 1960s, some friends at the University of New Mexico and I met to talk about our experiences as women. Females all over the country were engaging in group support and sharing, and it was crucial to becoming what some these days call "woke." Waking up like that naturally led to more outrage and activism.

Two friends and I organized the female graduate students at University of Colorado Boulder, and we became an activist group lobbying for women studio teachers, alumni shows, visiting artists, and more. None of those things existed at that point, nor was the absence unusual at campuses across the country. We even went to the local newspaper to air our complaints.

I did something similar with regard to black and white race relations while I was a college professor in the '70s. Did your lobbying do any good?

We were never reprimanded for our actions, and we did effect change. A year following our lobbying, a visiting, full-time female was hired, and the school began having alumni shows by women in addition to visiting artists.

When I moved Los Angeles, I was eager to participate in the two women's spaces being organized just as I arrived. I was a founding member of the first and only women's co-op gallery in Los Angeles. For eighteen months, we held monthly meetings with thirty members, where feminist theory and philosophy were the main topics. My mature work is grounded in such theory along with what was soon to become the Pattern and Decoration movement.

The curator for this show, Howard N. Fox, discusses art history and related matters associated with your work in more detail in his essay, but could you say a few words here about the nature of the work on display at Craft & Folk Art Museum?

Some have suggested that what artists say about their own work should not be trusted, but I'll make an attempt at characterization. When a formalist painter friend asked me several years ago what my work was about, I said, "the beauty and fragility of life." In response to, "You're kidding, right?" I answered, "No, I'm not kidding. I really mean it."

Most of my work from the year 2000 to today continues to reference the natural world and, in particular, the folly behind our ongoing destruction of the environment. Recently, I've been intermittently overwhelmed by fear and anxiety, along with a perception of downright menace from a U.S. government and corporate culture that seem to care nothing for the environment and the people who depend on it. I've always been politically aware, but the current scene feels extreme in terms of crisis and loss of hope. In my lifetime, I've never seen it worse.

Thinking back to my own experiences, I keep going back to being a housebound child gazing through a 3D View-Master® at natural wonders, such as those in the national parks. Most of us today experience human contrivances associated with nature, but we rarely or never actually

"I still question issues of "taste" in the art world and embrace pop-infused spiritualism, kitsch, along with folk and craft sources"

inhabit the natural world. I had my first art class at the San Diego Zoo, for example, and if you think about aquariums, natural history museums, public gardens, and theme parks, these are what constitute nature experiences for many urban and suburban kids.

Artificial in the sense of inserting people into something man-made, but with a dose of real nature as well.

Right, and I'll give you examples. Under a guide to "The Great Outdoors," *Los Angeles Magazine* lists a boat trip to watch whales; another to the Santa Barbara Channel to watch the moon, drink wine, and listen to Pink Floyd's "Dark Side of the Moon"; another to look for sea lions; a visit to Descanso Gardens; an ice rink; and a desert adventure in a red Jeep to tour crevices of the San Andreas Fault. We end up with what is essentially an artificial experience of the natural world.

And your latest work is heavily focused on the natural world, as people will see looking around the present collection.

My recent paintings encompass all my previous artistic interests rolled into one body of work. For example, some pieces abstractly depict underwater environments inspired by public aquariums I've visited. This is a good example of a ready-made "big picture" already framed behind glass. I've explored many alternative ways of painting; substitutes for paint from glitter and glass to fabrics; and the sensual pleasures of experimenting with and applying oils, acrylics, and enamels. I still question issues of "taste" in the art world and embrace pop-infused spiritualism, kitsch, along with folk and craft sources. I continue to be concerned with expressions of beauty—from rapturous and luxurious to rebellious or even vulgar—and representations of unsettling or uncomfortable issues. Some of my newest work seems beautiful—and it is—until you look closely. The contrast is what interests me.

Which returns us full circle to my first statement about your interest in expressions of beauty. Looking closely for contrast in the details seems a good starting point for viewers of this Craft & Folk Art Museum exhibition of your work.

The paintings in this presentation range widely in mood and implication, but for me they reflect both the beauty and vulnerability associated with life on Earth. Sometimes it's in the open-ended struggle to address environmental issues of our time, and occasionally I'm playing with plain old humor and goofiness, sadness, or sheer human folly. I think of the past periods or phases in my life as a long preparation for the present, mature work that combines my explorations of color, materials, decoration, layering, and luxuriant—but horribly threatened—nature.

Merion Estes / Born
September 5, 1938
in Salt Lake City, Utah.
Lives and works in
Los Angeles, California

1972 / M.F.A.
University of Colorado,
Boulder, CO

1970 / B.F.A.
University of New Mexico,
Albuquerque, NM

Solo Exhibitions

2018 / *Merion Estes: Unnatural Disasters,*
Craft & Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA
(curated by Howard N. Fox) *catalogue
2017 / *Field Notes from the Front Lines: Merion Estes*
Recent Paintings, CB1 Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
2017 / *Lost Horizons and Cooling Trend,*
CB1 Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
2015 / *Dystopia,* CB1 Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
2012 / *Naturally,* David Richard Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM
2011 / *Lost Horizons and Other Places,*
David Richard Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM
2009 / *Merion Estes: Lost Horizons,*
Galerie Anais, Santa Monica, CA
2008 / *In the Garden: The Art of Merion Estes,*
Earl & Virginia Green Art Gallery,
Biola University, La Mirada, CA
2007 / *Merion Estes: Recent Paintings,*
Cardwell Jimmerson Gallery, Culver City, CA
2006 / *A Sea of Possibilities: Paintings by Merion Estes*
1971-2006, Pomona College Museum of Art, Pomona, CA
(curated by Rebecca McGrew) *catalogue
2001 / *Merion Estes: Paintings,* Irvine Fine Arts Center, Irvine, CA
(curated by Carl Berg)

Selected Group Exhibitions

2018 / *The Feminine Sublime,*
Pasadena Museum of California Art, Pasadena, CA
2016 / *Mega Fauna: Endangered in Africa,*
Weingart Gallery, Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA
2016 / *Urbanature,* Williamson Gallery,
ArtCenter, Pasadena, CA
(curated by Constance Mallinson)
2015 / *XX Redux: Revisiting a Feminist Art Collective,*
Guggenheim Gallery, Chapman University, Orange, CA
(curated by Nancy Buchanan) *catalogue
2015 / *Art About the Environment,*
Los Angeles World Airports, Terminal 3
(curated by Jay Belolli)
2013 / *Dangerous Beauties,* Sturt Haaga Gallery,
Descanso Gardens, La Cañada Flintridge, CA
(curated by John David O'Brien)
2012 / *Un-Natural,* Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery
at Barnsdall Park, Los Angeles, CA

2012 / *The Nature of Things,*
Ruth Bachofner Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
2011 / *Southern California Painting, the 1970s,*
David Richard Contemporary,
Art Platform Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA
2011 / *Southern California Paintings, 1970s: Paintings Per Se,*
David Richard Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM
(curated by Peter Frank and David Eicholtz) *catalogue
2011 / *a.k.a. ZEN,* David Richard Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM
2009 / *Rant,* Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles, CA
(curated by Ryan and Dan Callis)
2007 / *Women Artists of Southern California, Then & Now,*
Track 16 Gallery, Santa Monica, CA *catalogue
2006 / *Plex,* The Brewery Annex, Los Angeles, CA
(curated by Noel Korten)
2005 / *Group,* Carl Berg Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
2005 / *Contemporary Soliloquies on the Natural World,*
USC Fisher Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
2003 / *LAPD,* Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
(curated by Michael Duncan)
2002 / *L.A. Post-Cool,* San Jose Art Museum, San Jose, CA
(curated by Michael Duncan)
Traveled to Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art
and Design, Los Angeles, CA (2004)
2002 / *Out of the Digital Domain,*
Irvine Fine Arts Center, Irvine, CA
2002 / *Hand-Painted,* Irvine Fine Arts Center, Irvine, CA
(curated by Carl Berg)
2001 / *The Importance of Being Earnest,*
Weingart Gallery, Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA
(curated by Michael Duncan)
2001 / *Cross-Pollination,* Holland Tunnel, Brooklyn, NY
(curated by Susan Joyce)
Organica, Coleman Fine Art, West Hollywood, CA
2002 / *Three's Company: Linda Day, Merion Estes, and*
Jeremy Kidd, Cypress College Art Gallery, Cypress, CA
2000 / *Cosmic Dermis,* Rosamund Felsen Gallery,
Santa Monica, CA (curated by Gordon Haines)
2000 / *Intraconnections,* Don O'Melveny Gallery,
West Hollywood, CA (curated by Carl Berg)
1998 / *Group Show,* Remba Gallery, West Hollywood, CA
(curated by Carl Berg)

Awards and Grants

2018 / Focus on the Masters, lifetime archive and
public presentation, Ventura, California
2017 / Murray Reich Distinguished Artist Award,
New York Foundation for the Arts
2012 / Finalist, International Association of Art Critics
USA (AICA-USA) for "Best Presentation in an
Alternative Venue" for *Un-Natural* at Los Angeles
Municipal Art Gallery, California
2007 / July Residency, Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant,
Santa Fe Art Institute, New Mexico
1996 / California Community Foundation Fellowship
for Visual Artists

Selected Publications

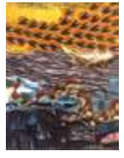
2018 / Mizota, Sharon. "The Feminine Sublime."
Los Angeles Times, May 28.
2018 / Enholm, Molly. "The Feminine Sublime."
Fabrik Magazine, April 23.
2018 / Heitzman, Lorraine. "The Feminine Sublime
at the Pasadena Museum of California Art."
Art and Cake, February 12.
2018 / Dambrot, Shana Nys. "Merion Estes."
Artillery Magazine, January 2.
2017 / Walters, Sydney. "Merion Estes."
Art and Cake, December 28.
2017 / Messerli, Douglas. "Pattern Recognition"
Hyperallergic, March 19.
2017 / Abrahams, Megan. "Merion Estes"
Art Ltd, February 23.
2017 / Ollman, Leah, "Vibrant Beauty in L.A. Artist
Merion Estes' "Lost Horizons."
Los Angeles Times, January 15.
2015 / Abrahams, Megan. "Merion Estes: Dystopia."
Whitehot Magazine (May 2015).
2015 / Pagel, David. "The Gorgeous But Threatening
World of Merion Estes." Los Angeles Times,
April 18.

Note: **Media of all objects are fabric collage and acrylic paint on printed fabric, except as noted. Dimensions are height x width x depth. Objects are courtesy of the artist, except as noted.**

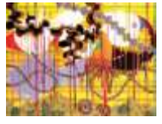
1. P/47 | *Solar Burn*
1997
54 x 64 in.

Collection of
Tom Zimmerman

2. P/16 | *Red Tide*
2003
72 x 54 in.



3. P/29 | *Storm Watch*
2003
80 x 60 in.



4. P/37 | *Undercurrents*
2003
54 x 72 in.

5. P/39 | *Toxic Depths*
2004
80 x 60 in.

6. P/36 | *Oil and Water*
2006
80 x 60 in.

Fabric collage and
acrylic paint and oil
paint on printed fabric

7. P/48 | *Strange Fruit*
2006
80 x 60 in.

8. P/40 | *Too Many Teardrops*
2006
80 x 60 in.

9. P/30 | *Dia de los muertos*
2011
48 x 72 in.

Collection of
Tom Zimmerman

10. P/20 | *Hot Zone*
2011
58 x 90 in.

Fabric collage and
acrylic paint on printed
fabric with photo transfer
and spray paint

11. P/31 | *Collateral Damage*
2012
55 x 79½ in.

Fabric collage and
acrylic paint on printed
fabric with photo transfer

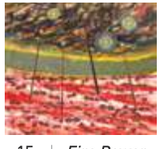
12. P/5,35 | *Melancholia*
2012
58 x 81 in.

Collection of Karla Kraus

13. P/18 | *Smithereens*
2012
54 x 72 ½ in.

Collection of Kelly Boyer

14. P/32 | *Desolation Row*
2013
63 x 80 in.



15. P/45 | *Fire Power*
2014
64 x 69 in.

Fabric collage and acrylic
paint on printed fabric
with glitter

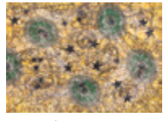
16. P/43 | *Los Alamos Sunset*
2014
62½ x 79½ in.

Note: **Media of all objects are fabric collage and acrylic paint on printed fabric, except as noted. Dimensions are height x width x depth. Objects are courtesy of the artist, except as noted.**

17. P/41 | *Memento Mori*
2014
64 x 88 in.

18. P/33 | *Neptune's Revenge*
2015
96 x 120 in.

Fabric collage and acrylic paint on printed fabric with glitter. Collection of Paul Rosenberg



19. P/46 | *Black Star*
2016
61 x 87 in.

Fabric collage and acrylic paint on printed fabric with photo transfers

20. P/22 | *Cooling Trend*
2017
86 x 111 in.

Fabric collage and spray paint on canvas

21. P/51 | *Angel's Trumpet*
2001-02
47 x 23 in.

Wood, metal, yarn, plastic

22. P/53 | *Pink Lady*
2001-02
47 x 23 in.

Fiberglass-covered wicker finished in Marmorino (synthetic faux plaster wall finish) and silk flower

23. P/50 | *Moon Garden*
2001-02
12 x 48 in.

Glass bulbs, polystyrene, iridescent acrylic paint, hot glue, wood dowels, and silk fringe

24. P/56 | *Visitation*
2001-02
36 x 36 in.
(approximate)

Wood root, paint, and found orange butterflies

25. P/55 | *Butterfly*
2001–02
36 x 12 in.

Wax dipped purchased metal butterfly, twine wrapped wood dipped in wax with faux jewels

26. P/49 | *Bee*
2001–02
30 x 12 in.

Wax dipped purchased metal bee and wax dipped silk flowers

27. P/52 | *Fruitless*
2005
48 x 24 in.
(approximate)

Yarn-wrapped wood, found antlers, found plastic-wrapped balls

28. P/54 | *Dumpster Dive*
2006
36 x 48 in.
(approximate)

Found wire, fishing lures, found shell sculpture, acrylic base

Merion Estes: Unnatural Disasters
September 30, 2018 – January 6, 2019
Craft & Folk Art Museum
Los Angeles, California

About the Craft & Folk Art Museum

Located on Los Angeles' historic Miracle Mile since 1965, the Craft & Folk Art Museum (CAFAM) presents dynamic exhibitions featuring established and emerging artists whose works create thoughtful and provocative visual exchanges between craft, design, and contemporary art. CAFAM's regular programs and events provide opportunities for the public to participate in artmaking and engage with local and exhibiting artists. For more information, visit www.cafam.org.

CRAFT & FOLK ART MUSEUM