

A blurred background of a night city street with bokeh lights and a colorful flower in the foreground.

christina mcphée

regeneration

The image features a background of architectural sketches. On the left, a vertical section of a building facade is shown with a grid of lines and diagonal hatching. On the right, a similar section is shown with a more complex, layered structure. The sketches are rendered in black lines on a light background. The text 'CHRISTINA MCPHEE: REGENERATION' is centered in the middle of the image.

CHRISTINA MCPHEE: REGENERATION





Christina McPhee: Regeneration

Christina McPhee makes collapsing and regenerating landscapes that blend technological precision with notions about place-making and interspecies community. A native of California, she traces her practice of drawing in nature to her childhood in the rural West, where resource exploitation manifests in earthquakes, wildfires, oil spills, and species loss. This exhibition draws upon McPhee's decades-long exploration of remote places, personal histories, and sojourns both spiritual and ecological.

McPhee's abstract compositions are built up within a matrix of fractured surfaces, vibrant colors, and a web-like layering of transparent effects. Residual smudges of pencil and paint imprint the artist's presence long after she has stepped away from paper, canvas or screen. Although she works across a range of media, the drawn line is always central, forming a connective tissue within and between works that join elements into cosmologies and vast interrelated systems.

- Beth Venn, curator

This book is designed by the artist in gratitude for an exhibition at KinoSaito Art Center, Verplanck, New York, in the spring of 2022. The text is based on a conversation between the curator, Beth Venn, and Christina McPhee.

A Wild Cat Settled in My Eye., detail [full image page 17]



Pearl Eyes, 2021



Kookaburra Betelgeuse, 2021



March 12, 2022 Gallery Talk with Christina McPhee and Beth Venn

CHRISTINA MCPHEE: REGENERATION : edited transcript

KinoSaito Art Center, Verplanck, New York

BV: I'm Beth Venn. I'm the executive director of KinoSaito, this beautiful, amazing art center here in New York and I am so happy to be here with Christina McPhee. Christina's an artist who works across a variety of media, she works and drawings and paintings and video. I think what first really attracted us about your work actually was this idea that drawing is so central to your practice throughout different media and that's meaningful for an art center that is interdisciplinary. We think a lot about works across different media and we just thought the idea of starting off this season of 2022 with your work, would be really appropriate because of the way you trace a kind of line throughout different types of work throughout different ideas in your work and most importantly, of course, throughout different media. So maybe we should just start with this idea of line and how it moves through. One of the first things that really struck me about your work - and maybe it's connected to this idea of line - the notion that in your work there is the micro and the macro, right? There are tiny details to be observed. But then there's also these almost like large ecologies, large landscapes, cosmology - you do all of this within a work. So let's talk about drawing first.

CM: Drawing for me was a very fundamental way of feeling and understanding the world starting when I was a child. I remember that when I was little, I used to get upset, cry, and feel angry. And my mom would say, go draw it out, and she would hand me crayons and paper. She didn't believe in coloring books. I just had it blank paper and crayons. She didn't really work with me about what I was feeling, so we didn't talk about it. She would just get me over there (to the crayons and paper). So this was a saving grace. A gift my mother gave me. I learned how to process feeling and effect through and experience through drawing. So when you're seeing my drawing, you're seeing actually almost like an embodied or a physical response to being in the world and trying to deal with being a feeling person in the world.

BV: There's a great deal of emotion in your work, as obviously in drawing, and layering. The paintings are collaged. How do you even begin to conceive and get started?

CM: First, I start with a physical system. My partner is wonderful at building custom stretchers by hand. We stretch the canvas and layer on glue ground, often using a Jacquard dye for a background tone. Onto the damp canvas, I scatter paper fragments, sometimes from printed matter, sometimes from torn up ink drawings. The ink from the drawings runs in contact with the application of glue. At the beginning of 2021, I decided I would love to do a whole year of squares and I can't really tell you too much about why, it just it seemed like the right thing to do it. When I start, I draw in graphite on the stretched canvas, which sits elevated but flat in on a large table in our wood shop.





Mother Desert, 2021





CM: You see these little these drawing, this line here at the canvas edge? These lines are made with very soft graphite. And I did these kind of, like, spiky things all around the edges, is it to say there was some sort of enclosure? I took the canvas into the studio to the painting studio and hung it up on the wall. I worked very procedurally around the whole canvas, making these dagger like marks. During this session, I was listening to a podcast, an interview on the pod cast with a curator, who is talking about a print in Goya's *Disasters of War*. It's called "one cannot look" ... (*No se puede mirar*, Plate 26 from *Los desastres de la guerra*, 1863)

Terrible things are about to happen with some figures, as is typical of Goya, as he works through the devastation in serial format. I was thinking about how you can't see *why* you can't see. The blinding effect of ideologies leads to danger and death. I just started feeling the scariness of being inside an enclosure and being trapped in a situation, a daily violence. I noticed that the color kept picking were colors of the desert. Drawing enclosure makes some sort of a box canyon, or a blind channel in a seismic topography. Inside, is this pink stream, and then when I saw that appear, I thought, that reminds me of the descent of a new being, inside a birth canal. The title finally comes around at the end: *Mother Desert*.

BV: A lot of your landscapes are often about time, or events unfolding, in ecologically troubled landscapes. I don't want to overly catastrophize this idea. But like there it is in your work. Often it has to do with both abandoned spaces, abandoned landscapes, but all land where something has happened. Maybe a wildfire or an oil spill or or some kind of climate catastrophe.

Mother Desert, 2021 (detail)

CM: Here in the gallery, the video playing right now is called *Soda Lake Unbound*, and it's a work that's sited at an alkaline lake bed that is seasonally wet so would be wet in the winter. This is shot in the fall when it's dry and blue. It was working at this site because it's very close to the San Andreas Fault. Earlier in the aughts, I had made a body of work, in large scale photomontage, *Carrizo-Parkfield Diaries*, making connection between prediction of seismic events, scientific visualization of geomorphologies post-earthquake, and the unpredictable nature of human post-traumatic stress disorder. I was interested in how you could you make a connection between the geology of a place above the site and human experience like a seismic memory of the Earth. Then in 2008, I was working again out at Carrizo Plain, where the San Andreas Fault is most visible, at the seasonally variable alkaline playa, called Soda Lake. I was out there with some architecture students from California College of the Arts. One, a dancer called Melissa Spooner, noticed my process of photographing the lake bed. I asked her, would she make up an improvised series of movements, using some props I had brought to the lake that day. These were eighty-inch long duraclear sheets, which I had printed with photomontage details of seismic visualizations (culled from geologic sources online), over digital renderings of medium format shots and video stills, which I'd made a few years earlier at this site. Melissa agreed. I hoped she could to make a series of work-like movements, in a manner after Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*. The work was to build a shelter out of ten or more plastic dura-clear printed sheets, using ribbon ties through grommets attached at each corner. The sheets were printed with seismic data visualizations. As she labored, I shot medium format film, as well as video. This became the raw visual data for *Soda Lake Unbound* (2009-2022). A sense of freedom generates somehow in the dancer's action even as the sheets keep collapsing. I loved how she generated a sense of impossible building, in a space where the tiniest details show up almost like quantum particles. This is its first public screening.

Soda Lake Unbound, 2022



BV: When I first saw your work, I saw such a connection between your moving image work and your work on paper or your painting. So for instance, we can just move on to this drawing, *Mercy for Marinetti's Dog (Teorema 50)*? Tell me about this piece, how physical, like your own kind of physical energy is in it. Like there's budging, they're smudging, and there's kind of smearing and there's a kind of like a physical energy in this work that I sometimes find in your videos. So you could talk about that too, because it's particular in that way, right, of the works in the show.

CM: It is. In the *Teorema* series of drawings, I was approaching drawing as a witness or invitation to entertain a visitor, as Pasolini introduces the angel into a bourgeois household in his film *Teorema*. My *teorema* drawings were large in scale and very layered. I was trying to just get a sense of the experience of violence in one's own body, to put that actually into drawing or to invite a safe haven for that material. I wasn't really even trying to put it into the drawing. I was like inviting the drawing to challenge me with its own potential for like reflecting that that traumatic intensity and physicality. The word 'teorema' just means theory in the sense of hypothesis, a working proposition. The drawing series was like an outlet for me to kind of go to an extreme level with that sense of the physical, maybe just that...

BV: Yeah, the way that you work these things and layer, these things like makes me want to identify a work as landscape, and it faces us, but in a way that's not rounded forms and soft. It is very fractal and it's very, I don't want to speak for you, but it comes out of the kind of landscape that you were exposed to early in your life. Right?



CM: I was born in Los Angeles, amidst loads of cousins, beautiful mountains, ocean. Then we moved to a remote place, or at least it seemed that way to me, in Nebraska where the prairie meets the plains. I felt pretty disconnected from my world, with the people side of the world. I spent a lot of time going out on my bike and looking at the prairie. It's intricate. It's a super heating with life. A huge sky when you look up, and then all this detail on the ground, bugs and flowers and in the prairie grasses. I loved it. I think that's how I got involved as a child with this idea of the micro in the macro being kind of one big continuum. I mean, this is a very common perception. I just happened to come upon it when I was young.

In the early summer of 2002, I was working with a microbiologist in Kansas on the Konza Tallgrass Prairie Biological Field Reserve. The first evening I was there, my host showed me this beautiful biological field reserve in the tallgrass prairie: "you know, when I see this, I see a massive rising cloud of data." The comment led me to a series of large scale drawings, photomontages and a sound work, all part of a multimedia project, *Slipstreamkonza*. The sound work was based on interpolating photosynthesis data into audio content; the data came from the microbiologist's field research using a device called an autochamber. The site was a hundred miles due south of where I'd grown up, in the Big Blue River watershed. I started thinking about data as 'telemimetic' or, communicating predictions, like the shape of things to come.

BV: As we imagine that experience that you had in that particular kind of landscape: you have talked about in your work about your concept of interspecies communication. Also, I notice an interstitial space is in the way you gravitate toward these lesser-known areas, these lesser-known landscapes, in that way. You are going to delve into these places, whether it's that lake bed that we were just talking about.. Like disaster sites that you've been attracted to.... I think through this idea.



CM: I went hiking with my son Ian in Utah, in December 2022, during the pandemic, after the Delta virus peaked but before Omicron had taken hold. We drove out to Zion and Bryce.. On the way out and back, we stayed in the outskirts of Vegas. And I was thinking how people play with chance. And also how landscapes are human constructions, both on a figurative level and in the abstraction of data, and how these fields of data are compromised.

In the lower Moapa Valley, along the now desiccated Lake Mead, we visited Pueblo Grande de Nevada, the Lost City, an extensive agricultural and pueblo site created by the Hohokam people. Early twentieth century archaeological methods apparently destroyed a lot of the evidence, especially around seeds, pollen, and animal bones. I thought about how forensically, things were turning up at the bottom of Lake Mead, just over the ridge.

Fortune was burning in my brain, thanks to Richard Smith's "Lady Luck," road trip music. When I got back, I set to work on another map-like canvas in vertical orientation. I was popping in collages of washi paper I had already printed with fragments digitally remixed from lost paintings, paintings that I had photographed in detail, but then gave up on, or destroyed, like a haphazard archaeologist in the dig of my own landscapes of memory.

*Lady luck, she is lovely / Lady luck, she is free / But I wish sometimes
that Lady Luck / She would find some time to spend with me / Why do I
worry? / Why do I fear? / It's just the beginning / But I feel the end is
near / I look around / And I don't feel like myself / Tell me please, tell me
please / Is it my mind or is it my health?*

Lady Luck, 2021



BV: Of course, I'm fond of all of your work, but I want to talk about these drawings that we have. You and I started talking a lot on the phone because you were in California, and I was here in New York. A lot of my understanding of your work initially came from ideas that you told me. I'm supposed to be looking at physical things, but because we didn't have them here yet, our conversations took off. You started working during the time that we were talking about this exhibition, like, very recently started working, for these are the most recent things that you've done. What amazes me about them is again the layering that you achieved when you're working on these things. It brings so many questions to my mind. To what degree are you composing them? Is it chance, right? And then this one has a lot of white space, a lot of negative space left over and then this one is a lot more dense. They are so like new and so fresh, they were done right at the same time, before you came here and yet they're quite different from one another. Everywhere you still see a lot of your signature kind of craggy, topographic, jagged edge. I don't know if you can say what you were thinking when you made these.

CM: It's a refined technical skill in drawing, almost like an automatic kind of drawing. I started making little fragment forms like this when I was in middle school. So I'm developing all these sort of forms that are just going to arrive and then I try to organize them into some sort of a map like topography. So it's like a system and then I look at the system and I'm like, this isn't enough, this always happens. I start with mapping, and then I have to go against the map somehow. I had gone out to the ocean and I was exploring sand dunes at the Estero Bluffs State Park in Cayucos. I found a spot where there was just a bird skeleton of one of the shore birds like a sandpiper, beautifully articulated, almost totally intact. I was impressed by the beauty of the thing, and I almost picked it up and then I thought, ah, it needs to be where it is. A sense of interspecies communication would include the idea that maybe that's there for somebody's purpose and non-human and I don't know what that is, so I should just leave it.



I started thinking about those bones. I couldn't get them out of my mind. As a teen, I obsessed over a poem by T. S. Eliot. I had memorized it to perform for a speech competition. *Ash-Wednesday* has to do with a story in the Bible. The prophet Ezekiel is inside a trance or vision, when he sees a valley full of what he would call the valley of dry bones. Eliot recasts this vision inside his poem, writing about a century ago. I was sixteen, the poem went into my deep memory. The lines are way in there.

I was drawing. I was trying to find extreme bleached-white tones against the creamy color of the paper. The paper is special too, it is new to me. It's a handmade kozo-hemp washi, Kumohadamashi, from Echezen, Japan. I was trying to pull the wiper into the center of the drawing, where the sensation of the bones lurked, and I kept thinking about the bones and then the poetry came to me. I turned to a translation of the Hebrew Bible. The Lord God says to Ezekiel, "Say to the Breath." Ezekiel is doubtful: "Can these bones live?"

Ezekiel's question is an artist's imperative: that's like saying, you know, you can make something go live. Eliot asks what is the ultimate value of any such magic? He would rather renounce the process, but at the same time he makes a poem about the renunciation. Back in the valley of the bones, bones start to develop sinews and muscles, and blood happens. Right before my eyes. I put it up in the wall and I added red and gold in twenty minutes and the drawing was just going, boom, boom. Boom. The bones are going to come back to life. In the material sense of those words, say to the breath, of life.



Say to the Breath, 2021





Yes! Lord Paradise Remix, 2021, video stills

BV: You often do this, and that brings me back to the video screen.
Yes! Lord: Paradise Remix: Mono Lake is in here. You have hummingbirds in here. You have the music of Steve Reich, *Music for Eighteen Musicians*, in here. You have the most important collaboration, which is with the artist and scholar Ashon Crowley. So talk like this idea of collaboration in your work. I think it's super interesting.

CM I met Ashon in London at a workshop with artists and scholars about cosmology and chaos. And later, a little bit before the pandemic, I posted of one of my seismic movies on Instagram, *Seismic Aquifer*. Ashon got in touch and said, I wish, this is what I wish I could do with video. Something relating to his music. I said sure. Let's do something. He sent me an elaboration on Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians*. Ashon had a layered gospel singing over it in his own voice. His voice iterates "Yes, Lord!" over this over and over and over again. I thought I could cut some animation into landscape shots. I thought, I'm going to make a really crazy animation. All the the cheesy little effects that you can do in that are built into the program, but I'll recombine them to make a series of effects in excess of what's given in the software.



We called it *Yes! Lord Paradise Remix*. We didn't know what we're going to do with this work, we were just playing. With landscape footage shooting at Mono Lake - east of Yosemite in the high desert, in a way this footage was the base line, in parallel to the Reich composition. The animation was a free improvisation floating in and above the landscape.

We were so fortunate to be invited to premiere *Yes! Lord Paradise Remix* for an exhibition called "Otherwise/Revival" at Bridge Projects, in Los Angeles. Just before the show opened in 2021, Ashon sent me a new file of music to replace the old. Now the music piece was thirty-five minutes long, up from seventeen minutes, with a full choir and Hammond Organ. Ashon had assembled the choir virtually through Zoom, because of the lock down, and produced this remarkable track! Like they did this incredible thing. Yet it's two weeks before the show in the Los Angeles. I'm going to have to make the animation twice as long as before. I felt that the length required some kind of shift of terrain. I was sitting at my desk, drawing. I looked up, I saw what I could do right outside my window. The hummingbirds were competing over a sugar feeder. I saw some seasonal birds there, migrants, and some that live here, full-time. Everybody was honing in on the sugar drip. Dive-bombs to get at the sugar struck me as a metaphor for the phrase 'Yes! Lord' on repeat in Ashon's music. Start shooting. I would start with my phone, immediately. The way they hit the sugar, it reminded me a lot of the chant that says yes, Lord over and over again. Just slamming on the sugar, and I thought, that's it. I just got some kind of message from the hummingbirds. I don't know really what they're saying, but I got something. I definitely got some kind of relay from them. There's like no other texts. It's unlike Ezekiel. There's no encounter really with God is more. We don't know. I mean, it's just it's just this repeat it's in so completely open possibility as to what?





BV: This idea of chance in your work and your openness to things happening to things coming into your line of vision: well, your work is so performative. Performance oriented, across media, so that we wanted in the theater space at KinoSaito. We don't think it would work as well in a classical gallery, but it needs to have this other dynamic. I could go with it. Our goal was to present a through-line in terms of the theatrical, performance-of-nature of your work and how it would be understood in relation to all of these pieces in relation to one another. Now we can transition into your very last performance of your time with us because in your studio and I wonder if you'd be okay with it If we all just moved into your studio and looked at the piece that you have been creating in the couple of weeks since you've been here...

CM: Mikiko suggested to me that I could make a work here at KinoSaito while I am in residency. She asked that I do some sort of diary or drawing recording of my stay in this place. I quickly ordered a roll of washi paper, shiramine, from Talas in Brooklyn. And within a day or two the roll of paper arrived, at the scale of five meters in length. I wanted it to stay really pristine. At my work table, each night I would just open up one bit of the scroll. And draw in that section, then roll it up until the next day. I was reminded of the Chinese painting scrolls at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City: the display allows only one narrow section of a scroll painting to be exposed to light for a brief time. The sensation of accumulated time signatures in waveforms flowing from the present moment, that's what caught me. And I started thinking about what is it? Maybe in this site, it's about the school, variations, and repetition in school.

Dream Canyon 1+2, 2022



So, I thought, well, I grew up in a small, very small town that looks kind of like this may be a little bit and minus the mountains, minus the Hudson. I attended a parochial school, like the former school this building was built for, back in the early twentieth century. So this is a school of memory for me. I was kind of a weird kid who was out in the prairie and didn't get along at school very well, and I used to get in trouble because I would get bored. I would draw in the margins of my textbook and on my papers and for this, I would get in trouble. I would have to stay after school. The punishment was to do this kind of repetitive: write on the blackboard, "I will not... " you know, I don't know, drawing my notebook, whatever it was, over and over again and I would have to write that for fifteen minutes (timed), and then I could go. So that's what I would do, now in tribute to 'schooling' because I love, of course, I love repetition, seriality, variations, and penmanship. I already have the 'elegant writer' pens with me that have a little bit of an edge on them. I'm going to practice my penmanship.

What's it going to be about? And it? What am I going to be repeating? And I thought about the experience of the piano and how when I started playing piano at about the age of seven, I loved to play the note in the middle of the keyboard, C, since my name starts with a C. It was like identifying with something, a sign and outside of yourself, and thinking that it's you. Drawing from right to left, I traveled through the piano keys, taking notes literally, scoring time here, CDEFGAB, forwards and backwards. The drawing was made across the whole roll of washi in six days.

I call it "Hudson River School."

BV: In a way it is a diary of a sense of your time here.





KinoSaito Art Center, in the Hudson Valley at Verplanck, New York, hosted “Christina McPhee: Regeneration,” curated by Beth Venn, March 4 to April 24, 2022.

I especially want to thank Mikiko Ino for her vision, in inviting me to show drawing, painting, and video, in Kino Saito’s theatre space gallery. Mikiko felt that my work across media echoes the diverse practice of Kikuo Saito, her late partner, who excelled in theatre set design, performance, and painting during his long career in New York.

Beth Venn spent many hours meticulously interviewing me in advance of the show, then created the complex installation and its contextualization. Chika Kobari shot video and stills of the show. Elizabeth Morocho and Michael Barraco supported my temporary residency at Kino Saito so that I always felt at home.

Christina McPhee

installation image credit: Chika Kobari, Christina McPhee



