

Eco-Feminism & Motherhood

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Marsha Kennedy's experience of pregnancy, the birth of her son, Erin, in 1988, and new-found motherhood turned her focus on the body as a site of embedded knowledge and

sensorial intelligence, one that is connected to the life forces of the natural world. For the first time through her personal maternal experience, she sensed a knowingness within the body, and this, combined with a renewed concern for the sustainability of the natural world for the future of her son, inspired new directions in her work. Kennedy explains, "The connection between human bodies with all living bodies, . . . [I] became more conscious [of] through pregnancy and birthing The interest in my son's future was tied into my concern for the earth's living systems and other species. These experiences strengthened my interest in environmental issues."ⁱ Kennedy continued to participate in environmental activism. She gave birth to her son shortly after moving to the Leslieville area of Toronto, where she became aware of the presence of lead-contaminated soil from a local battery industry. Joining together in a campaign, Kennedy and other local women lobbied for the cleanup of their neighbourhood.

These experiences and new realizations, along with research into eco-feminist theory, led Kennedy to explore in her work notions pertaining to the embodiment of flesh (embracing the materiality of embodied existence), the body's metaphorical relationship to the earth, and to challenge western philosophies that disavow the cognizance or intelligence of the body.ⁱⁱ These ideas have established dualities that separate body from mind, nature from culture and matter from spirit to distance western society from corporeality and the natural world. Her new investigations resulted in a few different bodies of works, including two paintings in 1991, *Our Dreams Clearcut Through Centuries of Rainfall* and *Our Unending Hunger Forms the Deepest Root*, which present images of a small child suckling from and being cradled by the earth. Between 1989 and 1991, she created *The Return* series, a collection of gouache and oil paintings, and then in 1993, *The Wailings of Windswept Soil* series, a collection of mixed media works that incorporate text.

The Return series presents imagined, desert-like landscapes under dark, cosmic skies, where images of the body and earth are enmeshed, intertwined and infused with symbolism that alludes to science and religion. Alternating synonymously as layers of soil or layers of flesh, these landscapes or bodyscapes present reproductive organs and pregnant and maternal bodies, with wombs and gestating

fetuses embedded within the earth. Images of a child and animal species are also presented as enveloped and engaged in the land or flesh, alluding to human procreation, gestation and birth, as well as the biological evolution of the earth and its species. The references to religion and science, in the depictions of the burning bush and the evolutionary stages of tadpole to frog, challenge pervading schools of Cartesian thought and theology that are implicit in shaping our negative relationships to our bodies and the natural world. As in the work *Qu'Appelle in Time*, Kennedy once again references the act of listening and calling in *Frog Song*, depicting within a surrealist, interior bodyscape a frog emoting into an ear, encouraging an awareness of the inherent knowledge within natural systems and suggesting that we should listen to what the natural world, our bodies included, is telling us.

The Wailings of Windswept Soil series is presented as two separate bodies of work; *Elegy I* (1993) and *Elegy II* (1994). *Elegy I*, features four paintings of an egg, first presented seemingly as religious iconography, and then as containers of growing fetuses, surrounded by dark grounds of mixed soil and wax. *Elegy II* presents paintings of organic, pod-like forms in a moonlit landscape. Evocative of plant species, these images are derived from human reproductive systems and they, too, are surrounded by the dark soil/wax grounds. Text is introduced in both *Elegies* through lightly sandblasted, poetic phrases on the glass of the works. The series, in title, imagery and text, allude to a sense of sorrow and concern towards the fragility and delicate balance of all life that the earth, our mother, supports – soil, seeds, plant, animal and human life. Kennedy wrote on this series:

*"The Wailings of Windswept Soil is a series of elegiac, meditative lamentations over the worldwide erosion and depletion of fertile soils. The question of 'life', both of the soil and of the flesh is presented. Although motivated by sorrow, these works are just as much an expression of wonder over the mysteries and miracles of life."*ⁱⁱⁱ

While Kennedy was interested in the theories of eco-feminism, she was cautious of essentialist leanings, not wanting to support the idea that women have an underlying, universal nature. These bodies of work, as is true of all her work, were inspired first and foremost from the artist's own personal experiences and convictions.

In 1990, Kennedy and her son moved from Toronto to her home town, Regina, where she quickly immersed herself within the arts community. Working briefly as a Program Coordinator for both Neutral Ground Artist-Run Centre and CARFAC Saskatchewan, she began teaching at the University of Regina Fine Arts department as a sessional instructor and lecturer in 1991 until she was tenured as an instructor in 2000.^{iv}

ⁱMarsha Kennedy, Personal interview, May 26, 2020.

ⁱⁱAbigail Bray and Claire Colbrook, « The Haunted Flesh: Corporeal Feminism and the Politics of (Dis)Embodiment », *Signs*, Vol. 24, No.1, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Autumn 1998), p. 46.

ⁱⁱⁱRyan Arnott, *Phantom Limbs* (Regina: Rosemont Art Gallery, 1993), exhibition catalogue.

^{iv}Teaching positions at the University of Regina included a one-year term as Assistant Professor in 1992-1993 as a sabbatical replacement for Jack Cowin and then again as a Visiting Artist for a two-year contract in 1994 to 1996.