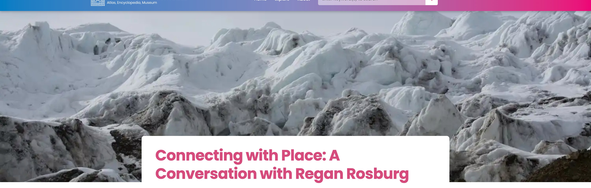

Connecting with Place: A Conversation with Regan Rosburg

Regan Rosburg is an interdisciplinary artist who weaves together science, psychology, history, and social engagement. With a passion for studying various ecosystems and biota, her work investigates not only the exquisite intelligence of ecology, but also the causes and ramifications of over-consumption. Rosburg teaches at the Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design and is the Artistic Director of Cayo Artist Residency in Eleuthera (Bahamas). She received her BFA from the University of Colorado at Boulder, and her MFA from Lesley University College of Art and Design, and has held numerous national and international residencies. In this interview, we discussed the role of place in Rosburg's art and how artists are a crucial voice in discussing climate change and human impact on climate and environments.

Sarah Pickman: Tell us a bit about yourself: what's your background? What are some projects you've been working on recently?

Regan Rosburg: I am an interdisciplinary artist, living and working in Colorado. My work lies at the intersection of nature and culture, and I weave together various perspectives to examine this intersection: ecopsychology, science, history, and social engagement. I work in a variety of materials, including installations, photography, video, painting, and sculpture. As I contemplate the multi-dimensional, global effect of Covid, I have been finding different ways to work with the idea of interference. In my studio, this has manifested as paintings of flowers with the interference of patterns over top of them. I am setting up sensory works that trigger collective and individual memory, such as organic smells and melting ice.

Sarah Pickman: Can you talk about the importance of place in your work? How did you first come to think about place as a way of shaping your practice?

Regan Rosburg: The first time I became aware of the idea of place was when I was twenty-five years old and traveled alone to Thailand and Bali, Indonesia. My subject matter was no longer an image in a book, but instead was a REAL butterfly or flower growing on vines, moving through life cycles, having their own histories and stories. Almost poetically, that idealism of beauty found its counterpoint when I wandered onto a beach that was slowly becoming littered with bits of oil and trash from cruise ships I could see from the shore. I was suddenly aware that "remote" was a myth when it came to humans. "Place" began to shape my practice because I was hungry to explore all kinds of environments at all kinds of scales, from the macro to the micro. I began to see the world differently, as not just dots on a map, but as vast networks of evolved systems, overflowing with organisms that were the result of millions of years of a long, changing story on this planet.

As an artist, this seeking, learning, and witnessing of place influenced my work heavily. I learned to appreciate the natural world and mourn the loss of it at the hands of human greed and incompetence. As I mentioned, "remote" is an abstract, almost mythical idea at this point. Human influence is felt on an ecological scale in every aspect on earth, from microplastics raining down in the Arctic to higher temperatures burning up the Australian landscape. This idea of place is interesting to me because places are not just physical locations, they are also philosophical, psychological, historical, mental, and emotional. Our relationship to the natural world is felt on multiple levels, though often not consciously, and often with a great amount of outside interference.

Sarah Pickman: How do you think about particular places as records or sites of memory?

Regan Rosburg: The natural world (of which we are not separate) is a symphonic masterpiece of collective evolutionary successes each playing at their own pitch, rising and falling at different times, harmonizing at different intervals. This miraculous world, millions of miles from a burning star, found a perfect balance in temperature to support an interconnected, highly functioning, responsive encyclopedia of beauty in the form of plants, animals, and elements.

In this way, our world is a living history that can be contemplated on both a macro and micro scale. A flower, for example, may live only a few days. But the flower has in its short lifespan a physical record of light and water turned to sugars; of insects that may have chewed on its petals; of hailstorms that may have tattered it leaves. It also has a history of successful adaptation and genetic transfers of millions of years, back to the very first successful evolutionary leap of photosynthesis. A garden, as another example, is a collection of these successes, all expressing their beauty and function. The garden also carries the history of the season, from seed planted to fruit born to decay and recycling of nutrients back into the soil. Forests are the same kinds of collections of memories and history, as are oceans, beach sand, stars in the sky, birds, trees, our own bodies. This idea can be expanded to every living creature on earth, past and present.

But where is the boundary of a place? I would argue that there is not one. Each is a "place" as much as it is a "thing," but thinking about it as a place carries with it a destination, a location, a history, a shared common network and a co-evolved familiarity. Where are the boundaries of the ocean if one thinks of it as a place? If the boundary is simply the ocean edge, then what do we make of storms that carry water inland? How far does the beach expand in time if one thinks of it as a place within history? Is not the sand also the mountains and riverbanks from which it was whittled, and the winds and waters that pummeled it into the tiniest of granules?

Put another way, places also function as sites of the Earth's collective memory, some with limitations to its data retainment. I have never seen this more poetically (and tragically) expressed as I did in the Arctic in 2019, when I participated in the Arctic Circle residency program in Svalbard. Glaciers are historical libraries. They contained snowflakes that had fallen thousands of years ago in storms and light snowfall. The snow itself was a collection of trapped elements in the atmosphere, frozen into crystalline magnificence. Snowflakes falling within seasons eventually became miles of thick snow compressed over millennia. As the weight of the snow advanced, this collection of compressed memories crushed forward, tearing away and pulverizing rock below, and casting these memories away in the form of terminal moraine and meltwater. Should the glacier reach the water, the massive calving would release leviathans of history; in an instant, this compacted historical record would give way, swan-diving into dark fjords of cold water. As the world heats, melts and burns, we are losing vast amounts of an incredible history on Earth, one that cannot be replaced and instead will be lost.

Sarah Pickman: You co-founded an artists' residency, Cayo, that brings together artists and scientists and seeks to stimulate artists with an interest in biology and ecology. Why do you think it's important for artists and scientists to work together, and what can each bring to the table?

Regan Rosburg: Although they may seem to be vastly different disciplines, artists and scientists are united by many of the same inherent philosophies. I think what most unites artists and scientists is shared fascination, experimentation, imagination, and a sense of wonder. These attributes allow artists and scientists to work well together. Both are familiar with the idea of abstraction, that intuitive, intangible, and as-of-yet ungraspable idea that prompts the urge to explore. The urge to explore guides both disciplines into new territories of knowledge by following instinct, trial, and error. Artists are often inspired by the intricate intelligence of science, and scientists are influenced by the beauty of the subjects they study. Thus, there is often a deep philosophical, poetic and romantic confluence that happens when artists and scientists work together because one can find solace and inspiration in the other.

I have seen scientists provide both data and ways of working that artists find exhilarating, and artists can bring interest and appreciation to scientific concepts that are being studied. For example, in my own work on species loss and climate change, I have worked with scientists to gain information about my subject matter (such as algae blooms in the Arctic, or the components of Petrichor, the smell of rain). I have had scientists feel moved and hopeful about my work because they recognize how art can tap into emotion, and how it can motivate the public to appreciate the delicate balance and majesty of the subjects they are fighting to bring attention to.

Sarah Pickman: Some of your recent work is based on collections you've gathered – of plastic waste, of old maps and atlases, even early issues of National Geographic magazine. What excites you about collecting and using these materials?

Regan Rosburg: All of these items relate to place, memory and history in different ways. There is something nostalgic about the images in these books; they show our spreading reach to understand and explore at that time. Moving from black and white to color images, the public suddenly could peek into different cultures, exotic animals, and untouched areas of the world. It was also a grand merging of photographic and journalistic artistry combined with scientific exploration. Like the first artists who were commissioned to (or inspired to) document the "new world" flora and fauna (William Bartram, Ernst Haeckel, James Audubon), the explorers and collections documented in the first hundred years of National Geographic have always struck me as a mixture of honest appreciation for nature and human curiosity. However, the documents are also a record of human recklessness and ego, with consequences that show up in our current experience.

In the 2019 installation Terra Nullius, my collaborator and I cut circles of images out of National Geographic magazine articles from 1906-1925. In that period, the race to the Arctic and Antarctic captured the imagination of the planet. These regions, considered the most harsh and remote, signaled a kind of capstone to dominance. A hundred years later, that very masculine-driven mentality of dominance over nature is being repeated in the same regions, though under much different ecological, political and social circumstances. The desire for exploration now is for securing strategic trade routes and untapped natural resources. Yet, the condition of the regions could not be more different: 100 years ago, those polar ecosystems were teeming with lifecycles that demonstrated a healthy planet. Now, the regions are melting, signaling a somersault into ecological oblivion if left unchecked. Documentation of the region's beauty and magnificence, by artists and journalists alike, is not lacking in reverence and wonder. Indeed, it is one of the most exquisitely gorgeous places on Earth. However, I do think that underlying that artistic and scientific documentation lies a latent sense of duty to capture something before it irreversibly changes.

The plastic waste I collected during my time in the Arctic is another kind of historical relic, and like much of my work, it is not about the plastic, but what the plastic symbolizes. Plastic represents mania, denial, avoidance, ego, and the system of perpetuity that keeps us from connecting to the natural wonder of our world. Not all plastic is bad, nor is it without importance. But from a philosophical standpoint, runaway plastic production and consumption is a metaphor for our inability to be satiated and content. Having enough is not something that enters the collective mindset, because ever since the colonization of the United States, we have lived by the notion of taking more than we needed, using any means necessary. Our ideas of conquering have materialized in pre-packaged conveniences, with the baked-in entitlement that we do not need to think of the 1,000-year lifespans of these objects. To find plastic washed ashore in these once-remote regions shows the crossroads we now find ourselves in. Do we face the history and make better choices? Do we return to our sense of wonder, with the knowledge that these intricate ecosystems are not guaranteed? Do we claim our place as stewards? Time will tell.

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