

# ARTES MAGAZINE

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## New York's Lesley Heller Workspace, 'Shaky Ground': Seeing Nature in New Ways

February 4, 2016 [Jeanne Wilkinson](#)



Anna Ortiz, 'Coast' (2013), oil on panel, 34 x 40"

Curator D. Dominick Lombardi uses the work of fourteen artists to form a narrative of anxiety and contemporary malaise: that is, we're *all* on 'shaky ground.' Collectively, the work is neither illustrative nor does it serve as propaganda for any particular issue or message—it's subtler than that. In his catalog essay, the curator explains how each piece fits within the premise, but it's an interesting challenge to consider the artwork, deciphering the "shaky ground" message on its own merits.

Lombardi names the issues at hand: "Foreign and domestic terrorism, war, hate crimes, discrimination, social media, partisan politics, corporate corruption, major 'accidents', health threats and the stress that follows..." While not immediately apparent, the works and their titles are capable of eliciting embedded, implicit, or eye-of-the-beholder meaning. The art on view (mostly wall pieces) vary, running from non-representational abstraction—shapes, colors and lines—to cartoonish figuration.

Arcady Kotler's *Painless Necklace*, consists of a string of brightly-colored medical tablets and capsules. It is not too hard to place this in a spectrum of cultural malaise and instability, asking the question: how can we function as a coherent society when many (most?) of us rely on mood altering drugs to get us through the day? *Coast* by Anna Ortiz pictures a plume of smoke rising from the some unnamed shoreline, recalling the nightmare of British Petroleum's Gulf explosion and spill, with its innumerable outpourings of toxic burning substances. The seductive painterliness of the imagery is a visual metaphor for the dilemma —with us since the Industrial Revolution— with its influx of modern conveniences and potential for environmental harm, a conflict afforded us by the fossil fuel industry, now threatening life as we know it.

Right: Cora Cohen, *Nomad II* (2009), Flashe, spray enamel, oil and wood veneer on linen, 34 x 38".



Similarly, Roman Turovsky's, *Stadt 24* (*Pulaski Skyway*), 2011, is a dark landscape, both beautiful and depressing. It typifies the industrial landscape now pock-marking the land anywhere factory smokestacks rise up. We can find murky skies like these all over the world now that we've exported our factories overseas; and now that countries like China have made economic growth their primary concern while their populations reel with respiratory problems.

But then we have Cora Cohen's *Nomad II*, a collaged piece whose unsettled composition and bulbous forms defy any specific narrative. But perhaps the title gives us a context. Are the random forms within the chaotic surface heading off somewhere, out of the picture frame? And as we peer at them, do they switch orientation and move in the opposite direction? Or is the piece as elusive in meaning as the Robert Motherwell series, "Elegies to the Spanish Republic"?

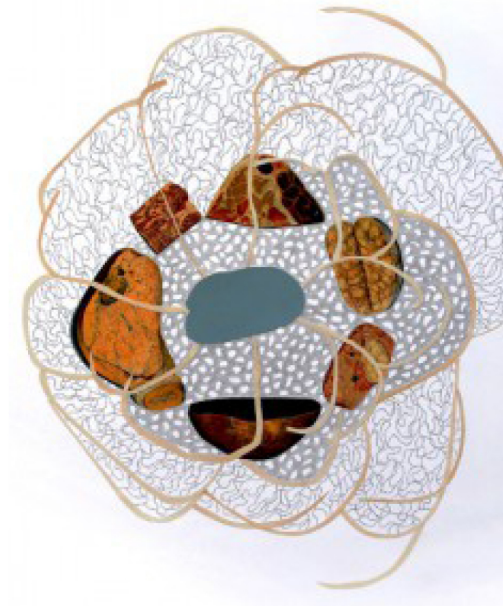
Dieter Kuhn's *Untitled* from 2013 draws us in as we attempt to decipher its interwoven, bright vs. dark jangle of color and line. The imagery is reminiscent of the energy grid that runs our world, a mysterious arena of pipes and coils and connections that are incomprehensible to those of us whose lives depend upon its inner workings. It is a fascinating arena with no beginning, no end, but only an impenetrable and winding series of connections and, more



disturbingly, disconnections.

Bryon Finn's painting, *VSS* (2014) with its jagged, even ravaged surface is an abstract study in energy and entropy. The complex linearities covering this plywood panel at times break off

the edges, as if the forces within the rectangle simply can't be contained and must expand, or grow, like free radicals that act upon the inner structure from clinging, exterior positions.



Left: Kirsten Stolle, *Cross Section RBGH* (2012), gouache, graphite, collage on paper, 30 x 22".

Gennadi Barbush's *Tractor* (2008) depicts solid ground that is indeed some of the shakiest around. Inside a centrally placed tractor on an empty field, two men in business suits sit comfortably in the driver's seats. In Barbush's farm field, soil is as barren as a lump of coal, a medium for conquest and control rather than a living

part of our earth. The industrial farm in the distance belies the rural myths that we still live with about farms populated by smiling farmers in overalls surrounded by happy animals that live there as pampered pets, myths perpetuated by corporations deeply invested in hiding the truth.

More on this front comes from Kirsten Stolle's depiction in *Cross Section RBGH* (2012) of a cell-like organism full of floating, not very appetizing-looking cuts of meat. The delicate microscopic form that holds them together seems almost whimsical until you look at the title and realize that Stolle's work is a critique of current "pharming" practices. RBGH refers to the hormone developed by companies like Monsanto to get cows to produce more milk at the expense of their health, and ours. Thus we are reminded that looks can be deceiving, and that we ingest chemically altered foods at our peril.

Catya Plate has created a surreal landscape that at first glance seems plausible but a closer look reveals trees festooned with what appear to be blood and guts, which, in this case, is literally true, as the artist uses her own blood as pigment. The painting, *Button in the Garden of Earthly Delights XVII* (2008) becomes in a way, sacrificial, reflecting the unity of nature, humans and art – as if we are all part of each other and in the act of joining together, some blood might be spilled.

Right: D. Dominick Lombardi, *Call of Nature* (2015), acrylic and oil on canvas, 48 x 36".

D. Dominick Lombardi's painting is another surreal vision of humans united with trees. In *Call of Nature*, (2015) a large upraised eye dominates a fragmented, dead tree stump next to a deer who is balanced in the ungainly act of either approaching the tree or lurching away, or both. While appearing comically monstrous, there is nothing very funny about this claustrophobic rock-filled barren world, the deer itself seeming to symbolize the precarious position of living in a world that is virtually upside down.



There is a similarly nightmarish comedic aspect to Dennis Kardon's *The Consultation* (2005). It features a group of people surrounding a table over which is hung a face-like slab of pink, dripping flesh on a meat hook while a child pokes it with a stick and



pees on the floor. The people themselves look fairly “normal” and unconcerned about the presence of this horrific object hanging in their center, which is perhaps the most frightening aspect of it.

Left: Dennis Kardon, *The Consultation* (2005), oil on linen, 65 x 55”.

Mary Ann Strandell in *Trestle, Rock, Dam* (2011) gives us a picture book blue sky world of chirping birds and butterflies surrounding a railway trestle that appears to be tilting, disconnected to anything of substance, as if the story-book lives we make up for ourselves maybe aren't all that stable. That, in fact,

they might topple and dissolve into fragments at a moment's notice.

Bill Gusky's *Ancestor Worship* (2014) depicts cartoonish fists and hands, a smiley yellow sun, a man smoking cigarettes out of his five mouths while the top of his head has been cut off to resemble an open barrel filled with fire. The bright colors and humorous shapes momentarily disguise the very bad vibes emanating from the seething surface. But the flames and the fists remind us how this essential oversimplification, this “cartooning” of the world with its daily barrage of ads and pop-culture imagery is masking a worldwide cacophony of violence and fear.



Right: Bill Gusky, *Ancestor Worship* (2014), Mixed Media on paper, 59 x 60”.

The last image in the series is of death in the form of Alexis Duque’s *Calavera II* (2015) which is a portrait of a grinning skull suspended on a white ground. Yet this iconic symbol of death has been colonized by plant life, as if one of the sacrificial heads from an Aztec ceremony had taken on the vibrant foliage of the jungle; as if death itself has become the host of rampant fertile life. As if, after the Day of the Dead, life goes on. Or so



we can  
hope.

Left: Alexis Duque, *Calavera II* (2015), Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16”.

The show is a kind of journey—a vision quest as it were—to see beyond current headlines and scientific reports about the ills of the world and look into them with different eyes. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, American landscape painters showed the public a new way of thinking about land and wilderness, to see it not as a threatening place that should be tamed or destroyed, but as a place to be revered, to be saved. It can be

argued that this visionary art helped Americans connect to nature in a way never seen before. Perhaps exhibitions like “Shaky Ground” can serve a similar purpose, to alert us to the malaise, anxiety and destruction happening all around us on so many fronts, and to act before it all goes up in smoke.

**By Jeanne Wilkinson, Contributing Writer**

‘Shaky Ground’

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