

Jessica Sladek

Forests and creeks without end

The notion of emptiness engenders compassion.
-- Milarepa

Jessica Sladek's photographs invite a particular kind of examination, one whose mode of apprehension and visual experience is of paramount importance for relaying subtle ideas about nature. Those ideas find their echo in the poetry of Gary Snyder, arguably the archetypal ecological artist and author of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996), a series of 39 interrelated poems, written over forty years, and titled after a sideways Chinese scroll painting. Snyder opened that book of poems with an epigraph by the Tibetan yogi-sage Milarepa that emphasized emptiness, which is significantly different than nothingness. As Snyder scholar Eric Todd Smith has argued, "...emptiness means that everything in the universe is empty of individuality; everything is connected to everything else." This idea is fundamentally reflective of both a Buddhist spiritual philosophy but also an ecological, scientific understanding of nature as a holistic system that includes humans. And here it is worth noting Snyder's bonafides as a student of geology and ecology, as well as a practitioner of bioregionalism, which is the rehabilitation and maintenance of local natural systems and the practice of sustainable living by humans as a part of nature.

Like Snyder, Sladek also has a background in science and bio-regionalism. And like *Mountains and Rivers Without End* her work emphasizes a kind of emptiness through her conscious avoidance of a clear, simple or picturesque subject (no individualistic, heroic "purple mountain majesties" here). Rather, the calculated "fullness of emptiness" within her frame evokes not only the local circumstances of these brambles and thickets but also the sense of a de-individualized, richly interconnected ecological system. Further, her frequent use of the panoramic format and close proximity to her subjects refuses our ability to read those images from a conventionally singular vantage point. As observers of nature in Sladek's photographs, we no longer have the privileged, omniscient, best-general-view that is typical of the western landscape tradition. Instead, we are invited to scan across the surface as if it were a scroll painting, and to participate within the seemingly natural structure, thus subtly activating our awareness that we too are a part of nature. Sladek's photographs therefore argue that, despite our historical attempts at both aesthetically and materially cultivating nature, the wildness of our environment persists and it has an intrinsic, ecological beauty that her technique aims to complement.

In her moss and bell jar assemblages, Sladek's technique goes so far as to create an experimental platform for wildness to take over. These assemblages begin with a photographic depiction but they never really end as she allows the plants to compete with, degrade and even overrun her images, referencing the dynamic competition of systems in nature. As viewers we are not only capable of interacting with these pieces by lifting the jars and smelling their musty odor, but curators are literally required to preserve these miniature ecosystems, an action that does not merely reference but actually enacts Henry David Thoreau's declaration that "in wildness is the preservation of the world."

Sladek's subject matter may seem relatively insignificant, but their ecological impact is immense: mosses are integral to the food webs of wetlands across the globe, and forests represent the largest source of CO2 sequestration on the planet. From a bioregionalistic perspective, Sladek's emphasis on these conventionally unremarkable subjects that are nonetheless central to our existence therefore asks us to consider our impact on the environment before we diminish our time within it. As it should be abundantly clear by now, nature can exist without us, but we cannot exist outside nature. And as Sladek's subtly crafted, meticulously composed photographs reveal, when we give ourselves pause to really look, the complexity of this relationship manifests itself beautifully in unexpected places.

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