

## VIRGINIA WAGNER BIOGRAPHY



Photo: Kristin Szytk

VIRGINIA WAGNER (b. 1986 Berkeley CA) is a Brooklyn-based artist and writer. She is the daughter of an entomologist and a Master Gardener. Her first job was scientific illustration. She received degrees from Oberlin College and MICA and worked in the studios of Wangechi Mutu, Julie Heffernan, Gedi Sibony, and Adam Helms, among others. Between 2019 and 2021, she was commissioned by National Geographic to make a series of paintings about climate and the arctic for two polar passenger ships. This past year, her work on 17<sup>th</sup>-century entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian was featured at apexart and received a STEAMplant grant. Currently, she is working on a commission for Guggenheim Works & Process. She received the 2016 Lotos Prize in Painting and has been granted residencies at Kaatsbaan Cultural Park, Bridge Street Theater, Guggenheim Peter B Lewis Theater, Mount Tremper Arts, Brush Creek, Byrdcliffe, VCCA, Edward Albee Foundation, Jentel Foundation, Ucross, Vermont Studio Center, and Yale Norfolk. She teaches hybrid visual art and creating writing classes at Pratt Institute.

# VIRGINIA WAGNER

www.studiovirginia.com

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## EDUCATION

- 2011 Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore MD  
Master of Fine Arts, Hoffberger School of Painting
- 2008 Oberlin College, Oberlin OH  
Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art & Creative Writing

## FELLOWSHIPS AND RESIDENCIES

- 2023 STEAMplant Grant, Pratt Institute, New York NY
- 2022 Guggenheim Peter B. Lewis Theater, New York NY (Funded by Guggenheim Works & Process)
- 2021 Kaatsbaan Cultural Park, Tivoli NY (Funded by Guggenheim W&P)
- 2021 Bridge Street Theater, Catskill NY (Funded by Guggenheim W&P)
- 2021 Mount Tremper Arts, Mount Tremper NY (Funded by Guggenheim W&P)
- 2020 Project Kôlab Grant, Office of the Provost, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn NY
- 2019 Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Grant, Garmany Fund, Hartford CT
- 2019 Brush Creek Residency, Saratoga WY
- 2019 Byrdcliffe Colony, Milton and Sally Avery Fellowship, Woodstock NY
- 2018 VCCA Residency, Amherst VA
- 2016 Edward F. Albee Foundation Visual Arts Fellowship, Montauk NY
- 2016 Lotos Foundation Prize in Painting, New York NY
- 2015 Ucross Foundation Residency, Clearmont WY
- 2015 Jentel Artist Residency, Banner WY
- 2011 Artist's Grant, Vermont Studio Center Residency, Johnson VT
- 2008 Fulbright Scholarship Finalist, Berlin Germany
- 2008 School of Visual Arts Summer Residency in Painting, Chelsea NY
- 2006 Ellen Battell Stoeckel Fellowship to Norfolk Summer School of Music and Art, Yale University, Norfolk CT

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2024 *Chroma*, Guggenheim Works & Process, Premiering at the Guggenheim Theater (Upcoming)
- 2023 *Dystopian Hope*, Oklahoma City University OK
- 2022 *Flora Fantastic*, apexart, New York NY
- 2022 *Creekworthy*, Flux Factory, Queens NY
- 2021 *Resolution*, permanent exhibition aboard National Geographic polar passenger ship, curated by Zaria Forman
- 2020 *Hotheads*, Catherine Clark Gallery, Los Angeles CA
- 2019 *Change*, Permanent exhibition aboard National Geographic ship, curated by Zaria Forman
- 2019 *The Strangeness of Structure*, Wells College, Aurora NY

	Traveling exhibition, Began at Adelphi University, Garden City NY (2018)
2019	<i>Under Here Somewhere</i> , Portal: Governor's Island Art Fair, Governor's Island NY
2019	<i>Lookout</i> , Google Headquarters, New York NY
2019	<i>A Strange World</i> , Gallery Petite, Brooklyn NY
2018	<i>Constructing a Praxis</i> , Columbia University, Teachers College, New York NY
2018	<i>Benders</i> , Real Estate Gallery, Brooklyn NY
2018	<i>Natural Proclivities</i> , Shirley Fiterman Art Center, BMCC, New York NY
2017	<i>Metropolis</i> , Solo Show, Kate Oh Gallery, New York NY
2017	<i>Floating Festival for Sustainability</i> , Peace Boat, Affiliated with the United Nations, Docked in New York City
2017	<i>Weather or Not</i> , Children's Museum of Art, New York NY
2017	<i>Body / Head</i> , Curated by Jacob Rhodes of Field Projects at Be Fluent NYC, New York NY
2017	<i>Uprise: Angry Women</i> , Untitled Space, New York NY
2016	<i>Soiled Garden</i> , Buddy Warren Gallery, New York NY
2016	<i>30 Under 30(ish)</i> , Victori+Mo Gallery, Brooklyn NY
2015	<i>Repose: Sleep and Autonomy in Hypercapitalism</i> , 184 Project Space, Curated by the Baroque Power Group, Brooklyn NY
2015	<i>In Bloom</i> , Mark Moore Gallery, Los Angeles CA
2015	<i>Far Far Away...</i> The Children's Museum of Art, New York NY
2014	(e)merge Art Fair, Victori Contemporary, Washington DC
2014	<i>Summer Preview</i> , Victori Contemporary in collaboration with Birnam Wood Galleries, New York NY
2014	<i>Emerald City</i> , Project For Empty Space and Solo(s) Project House, Gateway II Gallery, Newark NJ
2014	<i>Art from the Boros</i> , Denise Bibro Gallery, New York NY
2014	<i>Through the Looking Glass</i> , Project For Empty Space and Solo(s) Project House, Gateway II Gallery, Newark NJ
2014	Art Wynwood, Victori Contemporary, Miami FL
2013	<i>Uncanny Valley</i> , PPOW Gallery, New York NY In collaboration with Julie Heffernan
2013	(e)merge Art Fair, Victori Contemporary, Washington D.C.
2012	SCOPE Miami, Victori Contemporary, Miami FL
2011	<i>Academy 2011</i> , Conner Contemporary, Washington D.C.
2011	<i>First Look III</i> , Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, Peekskill NY
2010	<i>A Friend in Need</i> , American University MFA Invitational, Washington D.C.

## TEACHING

2016-Present	Pratt Institute, Visiting Instructor, Brooklyn NY Pratt Integrative Courses: <i>Another Earth</i> , <i>The Bestiary</i> Foundation Department: <i>Light Color Design I</i> , <i>Light Color Design II</i> , <i>Visualization &amp; Representation</i>
2018	Marymount Manhattan College, Adjunct Professor, New York NY Courses: <i>Painting 1</i>
2015-2018	Montclair State University, Adjunct Professor, Montclair NJ Courses: <i>Drawing I</i> , <i>Painting I</i> , <i>Intermediate Drawing</i>

## LECTURES

2022	Visiting Artist, New York Arts Program (NYAP), New York NY
2022	Visiting Artist, Montclair State University, Montclair NJ
2021	Visiting Artist, Tufts University, Boston MA
2021	Visiting Artist, Oklahoma City University, Oklahoma City OK
2020	Visiting Artist, Union College, Undergraduate Painting, Schenectady NY
2019	Visiting Artist, Purchase College MFA Program, Harrison NY
2019	Lecturer, Pratt Integrative Course Lecture Series, Pratt, Brooklyn NY
2018	Visiting Artist, Hoffberger School of Painting, MICA, Baltimore MD
2018	Artist Talk, Adelphi University, Garden City NY
2018	Panelist, <i>Natural Proclivities</i> , BMCC, New York NY
2017	Guest Speaker, The New School, Lecture for Drawing and Imaging courses, New York NY
2016	Visiting Artist, Pace University, New York NY
2016	Panelist, <i>Postcards Home</i> , Kutztown University, Kutztown PA
2014	Panelist, <i>Through the Looking Glass</i> , Gateway Center, Newark NJ
2011	Visiting Artist, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore MD

## ART CRITICISM

- "Paper Heart: Arcmanoro Niles discusses his work with Virginia Wagner," ArtCritical, 29 May 2019.
- "The Matrix: Tim Kent at Slag Gallery," Review, ArtCritical, 4 October 2018.
- "Virginia Wagner on Doron Langberg," Painters on Paintings, 14 Dec 2015.
- "Virginia Wagner on Anselm Kiefer," Painters on Paintings, 1 May 2014.
- "Virginia Wagner on Wangechi Mutu," Painters on Paintings, 13 Oct 2014.

## PRESS

- "We Are Still in Eden: Virginia Wagner." Project Gallery V. Interview. 9 Jan 2022.
- "Artist Spotlight: Virginia Wagner." Otravox. Interview. June 2021.
- Chaisson, Clara. "Climate Art Sets Sail for the Poles," NRDC 16 July 2021.
- "Meet Virginia Wagner: Artist." Shoutout LA. Interview. 20 May 2020.
- Keeting, Zachary and Christopher Joy. "Gorky's Granddaughter," Video Interview. 21 May 2019.
- Nemett, Barry. "Virginia Wagner's Landscapes of Exquisite Dread," Hyperallergic 2 Dec 2017.
- Graeber, Laurel. "What Struck These Artists? Meteorology Itself," New York Times, 23 March 2017.
- Hoffman, Anne. "Watching and Being Watched," Cultural Frontline, BBC Radio. 4 Sept. 2016.
- "The Gender Line," Documentary short featuring my Outlaws portrait series, Directed by Joe Rubenstein, 2016. Premiered at the Williamsburg Independent Film Festival.
- Nunes, Andrew. "'30 Under 30ish' Art Show Sends Up Arbitrary Lists," The Creators Project, Vice Media 5 Aug 2016.
- Buhmann, Stephanie. "Far Far Away...," The Villager 29 July 2015.
- Joseph, Martha. "Virginia Wagner," Bliss Magazine 6.1, 2012: 40. Print.
- Jenkins, Mark. "Academy 2011 at Conner Contemporary Art," Washington Post 21 July 2011.
- Hodara, Susan. "The Voices Emerging From College Studios," New York Times 1 July 2011.

VIRGINIA WAGNER  
PRESS

# project gallery v

Jan 9

## Virginia Wagner



Virginia Wagner by Eat the Cake NYC.

**Virginia Wagner** makes paintings set in zones of conflict between human progress and the natural world. She received her BA from Oberlin College in Studio Art and Creative Writing and her MFA from Maryland Institute College of Art's Hoffberger School of Painting. She was granted the 2016 Lotos Prize in Painting as well as residencies at The Watermill Center, Kaatsbaan, Bridge Street Theater, Mount Tremper Arts, Brush Creek, Byrdcliffe, VCCA, the Edward Albee Foundation, Jentel Foundation, Ucross, Vermont Studio Center, and Yale Norfolk. She is currently working on a new commission for the Guggenheim Works & Process as well as a series of paintings about climate change for permanent exhibition aboard a National Geographic and Lindblad Expedition arctic explorer ship. Wagner lives in Brooklyn, NY and teaches at Pratt Institute.

**Can you tell us a bit about the process of making your work?**

progress and the natural world. I layer paint as a way to play out this drama in the materials themselves. When I began as a painter, I was drawn to similar imagery – floods, storms, fires, growth, and decay – but because I had trained as a scientific illustrator, I would render each of them meticulously. When I finished, I would have created the likeness of water or smog, but it lacked the energy of that element.

Through experimentation, I began putting the canvas on the ground and actually flooding it with water and ink. The spills couldn't be controlled. Even when I attempted to direct them, they had a mind of their own and an organic complexity that better spoke to the complexity of the systems I was trying to harness.

My paintings now begin with a series of these spills. I then use oil paint to map the human structures in the piece – the architecture, figures, and perspectival, gridded space. I let these two ways of working play and combat each other to direct the image. Sometimes, if the piece is becoming too rigid, I'll put the canvas back on the ground, pour another oil spill, and wrestle the image out of that.

My work centers around the tension between human



*Boardwalk, 2021. Ink and oil on canvas, 32 x 40 in.*





**Tell us more about your work in the show.**

*Vinalhaven* comes out of the idea of a card house, a structure that offers safety and shelter but is incredibly fragile. The planes are almost without dimension. Spatially, the piece is unstable. Sometime the trees seem to be in front of the sky, while other times the sky is in front of the trees. They flip back and forth. I like to think of this strange geometry as a way of folding together multiple moments in time, allowing the viewer to observe their relationships.

*The Museum* pictures a flooded museum. We build these secular temples to house our stories and images and assume that they will be preserved indefinitely. But even these spaces are subject to entropy and change. This painting is also a look at the journey of the art object when it becomes unmoored from its originally intended resting place. Where will it travel to in its long life? How will it evolve?



*Opening Night*, 2021. Ink and oil on canvas, 32 x 40 in.

**What are some references you draw upon in your work? Are there any themes in particular that you like to focus on when creating?**

My work looks at cycles of construction and destruction. I reference locations where the stakes of this struggle are high: flood zones, areas of fire, and vulnerable shelters. I've painted homes that have burned in New Mexico, an empty pool near the Salton Sea, an abandoned hospital complex on Staten Island, bridge underpasses, and temporary shelters in the Louisiana bayou. As Margaret Atwood said of *The Handmaid's Tale*, "I made nothing up." I didn't have to. We live on a volatile planet that is going through unprecedented transformation at our hands. The paintings show us glimpses of the world around us – stretched into strangeness in the mirror of the canvas.

**Who are some of your favorite artists? Or who has been inspirational recently?**

I've had the privilege of working as an assistant to many of my favorite artists. When I first moved to New York, I supported myself this way. I learned a great deal from each



of them about technique, grit, chance, career, and sourcing inspiration. I assisted Wangechi Mutu, Julie Heffernan, Andrew Ondrejcek, Adam Helms, Kyle Staver, and Miriam Cabessa, each of whom influenced my practice.

Most recently, I've been feeling a strong artistic kinship to my generation of artists creating across multiple fields and am interested in how we might work together. I feel that the art world has become too specialized, corporate, and demanding of degrees. I'm interested in drawing on the energy of the collective, as the New York art scene did in earlier eras and as people are doing in Berlin, where I worked with the Agora Art Collective. At this moment, I am most inspired by the dancers, filmmakers, writers, musicians, and performance artists who I am honored to call friends.

**Do you have any shows coming up? Anything else you would like to share?**

I am currently knee-deep in two exciting projects. I'm creating a series of paintings for permanent exhibition aboard a National Geographic and Lindblad Expedition arctic explorer ship. The works depict an ice world, where humans mine and build with ice as their main resource. They offer up a funhouse mirror to climate change, allowing us to contemplate a world in flux and reflect on our insatiable drive to extract resources. The eighteen paintings will span a full deck of the ship. Three of them are featured here.

I am also creating the visuals for a collaborative performance project for Guggenheim Works & Process. This piece is inspired by British artist, filmmaker, writer, and queer activist Derek Jarman and his memoir *Chroma*, a meditation on the color spectrum written during the AIDS crisis.

**Virginia Wagner's** work is included in our show "*We Are Still in Eden*," January 7th - February 28th, 2022. Visit her [website here](#) or on Instagram [@virginiawagner](#).



*The Bard*, 2021. Ink and oil on canvas, 62 x 78 in.



# SHOUTOUT LA

## Meet Virginia Wagner: Artist

May 20, 2021 · [Leave a reply](#)

<https://shoutoutla.com/meet-virginia-wagner-artist/>



We had the good fortune of connecting with Virginia Wagner and we've shared our conversation below.

**Hi Virginia, what habits do you feel helped you succeed?**

I have found that the most important thing you can do as an artist is to continue to make work. To make work through every season. And not just on your good days or when the muse visits.

I've organized my life around allowing that work to happen – dedicating and prioritizing space and time. It's a great privilege to be able to order my days in this way, but it also doesn't take an enormous amount of resources. I recommend keeping your life as simple, small, and inexpensive as possible. For me, a full-time day job makes creating art impossible, so I work part time. Currently, I am a Visiting Instructor at Pratt Institute.

Sometimes opportunities come and it's hard to know if they're good or bad for you as an artist. Perhaps you are offered a job that has creative aspects to it and a high salary but wouldn't allow you time to delve into your experimental practice. When I come to these crossroads, I focus on my compass direction as an artist. It's very important to me to be able to feel this tug in myself that will lead me, not in the direction that society or a family member wants for me, but in the direction that my art practice calls for.







**Alright, so let's move onto what keeps you busy professionally?**

I am currently knee-deep in two exciting projects. I'm creating a series of paintings for permanent exhibition aboard a National Geographic and Lindblad Expedition arctic explorer ship. The works depict an ice world, where humans mine and build with ice as their main resource. They offer up a funhouse mirror to climate change, allowing us to contemplate a world in flux and reflect on our insatiable drive to extract resources. The painting installation will be immersive and span a full deck of the ship.

I am also creating the visuals for a collaborative performance project for Guggenheim Works & Process. This piece is inspired by British artist, filmmaker, writer, and queer activist Derek Jarman and his memoir *Chroma*, a meditation on the color spectrum written during the AIDS crisis.

These are new projects, but the themes that they address have been with me for a long time, taking on different forms, questions, and scales as I evolve and seek new opportunities.

Much of my work tackles the relationship between humans and the natural world. I grew up as the child of an entomologist and my first job was as a scientific illustrator. My work looks at cycles of growth and decay and the ways we are reshaping the earth. I'm also interested in hybridity, queerness, color, and visual narrative.

All I can ask as an artist is to have the chance to explore these themes over and over again – with a variety of media and at different stages of my life, as I grow and the world shifts around me.

**If you had a friend visiting you, what are some of the local spots you'd want to take them around to?**

You can never step into the same New York art world twice. I love that it is constantly morphing. And now the spring is splitting the ice of quarantine and shows are starting to open again. Since exhibitions are temporary and the hot spots are always changing, I can't give blanket recommendations. But I can recommend a few exciting shows that are on view now: Natalie Frank at Salon 94 and Lyles & King; Martin Wong and Aaron Gilbert at PPOW gallery; James Prosek and Zaria Forman at Mana Contemporary; Alice Neel at the MET; Richard Mosse at Jack Shainman; Jenny Morgan at Mother Gallery.

The best part about being in New York is seeing and participating in the work of friends in all branches of the arts who are making incredible things. Two of my Guggenheim collaborators are principal dancers in the NYC Ballet and I'm on the edge of my seat for their season to begin. A friend recently launched a queer performance venue in Bushwick called Wet Spot. Another founded a reading series for authors whose book tours were cancelled during the pandemic called Debuts and Redos. Supporting and celebrating these projects is why I choose to live in New York.







**Shoutout is all about shouting out others who you feel deserve additional recognition and exposure. Who would you like to shoutout?**

I'd like to express gratitude to the artists that I worked for over the years. As an assistant, my own work evolved through immersion in their worlds and practices. Working in their studios allowed me to be able to see how they created art from the inside out, how they organized their time, what they referenced and collected, and how they connected to other artists and institutions. Far from giving me an equation for how to make strong artwork, I learned that I need to ask myself hard questions and wander into unknown territory.

So, thank you – Wangechi Mutu, Julie Heffernan, Andrew Ondrejcek, Adam Helms, Kyle Staver, Gedi Sibony, and Miriam Cabessa!

**Website:** [www.studiovirginia.com](http://www.studiovirginia.com)

**Instagram:** @viriniawagner

**Facebook:** virginiasstudio

#### **Image Credits**

The two images of me were taken by: [Eat the Cake NYC](#)

June 29, 2021

Virginia Wagner  
Otra Vox Interview



- Your work has many physical dimensions to it. Could you describe your layering technique?

Much of my work centers around the tension between human progress and the natural world. I layer paint as a way to play out this drama in the materials themselves. When I first started as a painter, I was drawn to similar imagery – floods, storms, fires, growth, and decay – but I came from a scientific illustration background, so I would illustrate each of them meticulously. Every cresting wave. Every smoke cloud. By the time the last brush stroke was in place, I would have created the likeness of water or smog, but it would feel petrified and artificial. The very act of trying to capture these wild elemental forces in detail would zap them of their power.

Through experimentation, I learned I could set a flood in motion by putting the canvas on the ground and actually flooding it with water and ink. The spills couldn't be controlled or contained. Even when I attempted to direct them, they had a mind of their own and an organic complexity that better spoke to the complexity of the systems I was trying to harness.

My paintings now begin with a series of these spills. I then use oil paint to map the human structures in the piece – the architecture, figures, and perspectival, gridded space. I let these two ways of working play and combat each other to direct the image. Sometimes, if the piece is becoming too rigid, I'll put the canvas back on the ground, pour another big oil spill, and then wrestle the image out of that.

- What are you reckoning with through your paintings? It feels highly contemporary and familiar and tense.

June 29, 2021

The work reckons with cycles of construction and destruction. I'm looking to our contemporary battlegrounds, places on the earth where the stakes of this struggle are high. I also find myself peering into the foggy future and imaging the many ways our landscapes will shift. But, as Margaret Atwood said of *The Handmaid's Tale*, "I made nothing up." I didn't have to. We live on a volatile planet that is going through unprecedented transformation at our hands. The paintings show us glimpses of the world around us – stretched into strangeness in the mirror of the canvas – so that we might access the wonder of it and look with fresh eyes on our own perspectives and position.

I believe the intensity of the paintings that you are sensing comes from my collapsing time and space into the rectangle of the canvas. Paintings don't unfold along a timeline. Instead, as someone who is invested in transformation and change, I'm conscious of folding together multiple moments within the still piece and allowing the viewer to observe their relationships and the special geometry of their meeting.

**- I understand you have a degree in literature. How do words inform/compliment your painting?**

The written word has always run parallel to my visual practice. My notebooks are a scribbly tangle of both. Ideas slip over the porous boundary of these media easily for me. In fact, tossing them back and forth over the line, they often pick up substance and opacity. Sometimes they prefer to be borne out on one side or the other. Sometimes both.

For instance, I'm currently working on a commission of sixteen paintings about climate change for a National Geographic and Lindblad Expedition ship. The works will live permanently on this exploration vessel that will navigate between the Arctic and the Antarctic. The largest painting will be of an opera singer on the ship trailing a gown of tangled trash, recalling an oceanic garbage patch. I will pair this with a poem from her point of view – a bard hired to sing a requiem for the earth on a ship that circles it to observe its decline.

I am also using writing as script and voiceover for new animated pieces. Many of the ideas that birth my paintings are narrative, in the sense that they involve character and change. I'm looking forward to unfolding some of these dramas in the 4<sup>th</sup> dimension.

**- How do you balance your art practice and teaching life?**

I'm fortunate to teach the talented students at Pratt Institute. I've kept my teaching parttime in order to prioritize a full-time studio practice, although the pay is low. In the past couple years, I've developed my own classes at Pratt – one on animal stories and illuminated manuscripts and one, called *Another Earth*, about world building in which each student builds out a world of their own design. I think of the course as a small universe generator.

The depth of the students' imaginations and their creative manifestations is startling. The class keeps me on a steady diet of magical realist fiction, comics, and graphic novels, and sharpens my

June 29, 2021

ear and eye through the constant editing of visual and written work. It also keeps the ground beneath my feet pleasantly shifting at the outrageous “what ifs” that my students bring to life.

Practically speaking, I am only teaching two, sometimes three, days a week and the rest of the time is spent in the studio or participating in or attending the exhibitions, performances, screenings and readings of friends across a wild assortment of the arts in New York City.

**- What is your work space like? Do you have defined spaces for painting, writing, etc.?**

I worked in my living room for the first seven years I lived in Brooklyn, even though I had a roommate. You make your work wherever you can and your practice morphs to accommodate that.

I often think about Wangechi Mutu, who I assisted for many years, who had nowhere other than her bedroom to work after graduating from Yale’s sculpture MFA. She certainly couldn’t build large sculpture, or even really paint, so she started making small collages. Her power as an artist was compact but visible in those small folds and cuts and those paper pieces ended up launching her career.

These days I do have a shared studio in the Gowanus Can Factory and am grateful for the remove from home, the large walls, and the community of artists in the building.

**- Are there any other contemporaries you feel you are in a (metaphorical) club with? Stylistically, conceptually, or otherwise?**

When I first moved to New York I worked for many artists as an assistant. I learned a great deal from each of them, not only about how they technically created their work, but also about how to navigate a career, how to manage time, and what they looked to for inspiration. In addition to Wangechi Mutu, I assisted Julie Heffernan, Andrew Ondrejcek, Adam Helms, Kyle Staver, and Miriam Cabessa, each of whom influenced my own practice.

Most recently, I’ve been feeling a strong artistic kinship to my generation of artists creating across multiple fields and am interested in how we might work together. I feel that the art world has become too specialized, corporate, and demanding of degrees. I’m interested in drawing on the energy of the collective, as the New York art scene did in earlier eras and as people are doing in Berlin, where I’ve lived. At this moment, I am most inspired by the dancers, choreographer, and filmmaker who I’m working with on an upcoming Guggenheim Works & Process commission as well as the authors, musicians, and performance artists who I am honored to call friends.



## Climate Art Sets Sail for the Poles

The polar expedition ship *Endurance* will take its long awaited maiden voyage this summer—with a permanent climate art exhibition on board.

July 16, 2021

[Clara Chaisson](#)  
Contributor



*Weather Change* by Julie Heffernan

There's a lot to consider when curating an art exhibit that showcases more than 50 artists working across diverse media including drawings, paintings, videos, sculptures, and soundscapes. Now imagine doing it on a ship bound for Antarctica, a vessel that may face 35-foot swells in notoriously unforgiving polar waters. (Pro tip: Work closely with the ship engineers, and forget about showing any freestanding pieces.)

[Change](#) is a first-of-its-kind polar art exhibition permanently housed aboard the [National Geographic Endurance](#), a new polar expedition ship designed to ferry adventurous passengers to the Arctic and Antarctica. It is also [Zaria Forman's](#) curatorial debut. Her sole requirement for the pieces she commissioned for the show was that they be inspired by the frigid lands and seas at our planet's northern and southern extremes. Much like Forman's own work.



*Zaria Forman working on Disco Bay, Greenland*

The Brooklyn-based artist creates hyperrealistic pastel drawings of glaciers and sea ice that make the planet's poles—and the effects of climate change that are rapidly ravaging them—feel urgently, chillingly present.

Forman's fascination with far-flung locales began on childhood trips with her family that served as inspiration for her mother, photographer Rena Bass Forman. The younger Forman, too, takes pictures when she travels—thousands of them. Then, back in the studio, she draws her large-scale compositions from a combination of memory and photographs.

"Occasionally I will reshape the ice a little or simplify a busy background to create a balanced composition," she says. "But 90 percent of the time I am depicting the exact scene that I witnessed, because I want to stay true to the landscape that existed at that point in time."





Arctic Landscape, Mined, by Virginia Wagner

Forman has had no shortage of opportunities to bear witness to the melting poles. In 2015 she traveled to Antarctica as the artist in residence aboard the *National Geographic Explorer*. She then tagged along on flights with NASA's [Operation IceBridge](#), a program that conducts yearly airborne surveys of polar ice. In 2016 and 2017, Forman logged 95 hours of flying time with the IceBridge crew over Antarctica, Greenland, and the Canadian Arctic, winging just 1,500 feet—five football fields—above the ice.

Working with NASA scientists shifted Forman's perspective on both her subject matter and her approach to drawing it. "They have been flying over the exact same flight paths, the same time of year, for over a decade now, and they all spoke of how they could see the changes in the ice, especially sea ice,) with their naked eyes from one year to the next," says Forman. "This experience informed and elevated my own practice of observing ice, and in turn, my drawing technique evolved toward heightened precision and nuance."

Forman sees the "Change" exhibit as an opportunity beyond her own art to reach people, to encourage passengers to engage differently and more deeply with the region they see outside the ship's windows and on their excursions.



LN 6910 from the "Terminus" series by Reuben Wu



Among the many works in the exhibit are paintings by [Virginia Wagner](#) that feature giant peaks of ice surrounded by rigs and scaffolding, being mined and chopped for human use. Then there's the photography of [Reuben Wu](#), who used a drone outfitted with LEDs to photograph a glacier under the night sky, the ice shining like a memory amid the darkness of forgetting. "Whale Bells," by Andrew Bearnot and NRDC's artist-in-residence [Jenny Kendler](#), inspired by the humpback whale's songs, is also on display, while a sculpture by [John Grade](#) imagines what it would feel like to be within sea ice floating on the water. Guests can stand inside it and even grab onto it in rough seas.

"It's an exhibition with unexpected perspectives, exploring light, enchantment, geometry, turbulence, and tranquility," says Forman. "For passengers aboard the *Endurance*, this creates a profound understanding of, and connection to, places at the forefront of climate change."

*The Endurance was originally set to launch in April 2020. After spending more than a year waiting out the pandemic in Norway, the ship finally sets sail to Iceland and Greenland on July 21, 2021.*

# Gorky's Granddaughter

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Tuesday, May 21, 2019

## Virginia Wagner, May 2019



Posted by Zachary Keeting at 9:44 PM



Labels: artist interview, Christopher Joy, Virginia Wagner, Zachary Keeting

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# The New York Times

## Events for Children in NYC This Week

By Laurel Graeber

March 23, 2017



A photograph of a diorama from Matthew Albanese's series "The Tree in My Backyard — Weathering the Storm." Courtesy of the artist and Benrubi Gallery, NYC

**'WEATHER OR NOT, THAT IS THE QUESTION'** at the Children's Museum of the Arts (through May 20). Who hasn't at some point cursed or crowed over the weather? In this exhibition, it has inspired eight contemporary artists to make sometimes stormy statements. For "Presidential Commemorative Smog Plates," [Kim Abeles](#) left dinner plates, each stenciled with an American president's face, on her Los Angeles rooftop. The more she disapproved of a president's environmental policies, the longer she let his plate accumulate grime. [Virginia Wagner](#)'s painting "After the Flood" contemplates climate change, and [Suzanne Anker](#)'s installation "Astroculture (Shelf Life)" addresses crop science. More fancifully, [Matthew Albanese](#) photographs meticulously assembled dioramas so they look like real meteorological phenomena. The forecast? Lots of family discussion.

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A version of this article appears in print on March 24, 2017, Section C, Page 22 of the New York edition with the headline: For Children. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)



# HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews Weekend

## Virginia Wagner's Landscapes of Exquisite Dread

Wagner would agree with Samuel Beckett, that "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness."



Barry Nemett December 2, 2017

<https://hyperallergic.com/414497/virginia-wagner-metropolis-kate-oh-gallery-2017/>



Virginia Wagner. "Sky Burial" (2016), ink, acrylic, and oil on canvas, 44 x 52 inches (images courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted)

There used to be even more birds in Virginia Wagner's "Sky Burial" (2016) than there are now. Little by little, however, they flew away to oversee other quieter, but no less dynamic, images of hers. Still, there's plenty of flutters and squawks to go around. Alfred Hitchcock would be pleased.



Few winged creatures inhabit Wagner's most recent, well-crafted canvases currently on display in the artist's first one-person New York exhibition.

*Metropolis*, the title of the show, is also the inaugural solo show at the Kate Oh Gallery (November 9 – December 9, 2017). What an exciting way for both artist and venue to take off.

We take in Wagner's strange, apocalyptic narratives from bird's-eye views. "Sky Burial" is fascinating, but who would blame a pigeon or dove for leaving behind the alluring corpse, submerged naked in an unburied glass coffin, as well as any number of other dead bodies that drift toward the horizon? The seductive haze of distance is not just atmospheric perspective; it's pollution. Here, it smells bad but looks good. Sublime, even. Sort of. That's part of this artist's strength: blending attraction and aversion.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, "The Hunters in the Snow (January)" (1565), oil on panel, 117 x 162 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (image via [Web Gallery of Art](#))

Without stopping, Wagner's birds fly past some of her other beautifully dreadful cities and landscapes. Was it simply not part of their itinerary? It's freezing in Pieter Bruegel's "Hunters in the Snow" (1565), but that didn't stop *his* black birds, ancestors to Wagner's white ones, from hanging out in his pollution-free, fresh-smelling world. Whether perched or flying, Bruegel's silhouetted crows, despite being bitterly cold, seem as content as the silhouetted skaters down below. But are they?

Though milder than Brueghel's, the weather is also tougher and more unpredictable in Wagner's world. The lovely warm and cool parts of her palette decorate dizzying, stomach-wrenching places in urgent need of remedies far more powerful than Pepto-Bismol-pink medicine. The settings for her stories are often psychologically and spiritually disturbing. It's not a matter of a few missing shingles or a few broken stairs; it's as if her pleasant, pastel colors have flown out of a bedtime story, smack into a nightmare. I imagine a pair of tiny ballet slippers pirouetting into a devastated park crammed with colorful swings and seesaws. And in the distance, I envision ordered rows of brand-new, see-through coffins.



Virginia Wagner, "Shadow Puppets" (2017), ink and oil on canvas, 44 x 56 inches

There's beauty in this painter's angst. There's also humor, if we accept Samuel Beckett's line that "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness," as he once wrote into his 1957 absurdist play, *Endgame*. And there is surely unpredictability. When you're inside one of Wagner's complex compositions, you know how handsome they are to see, but you don't know what to expect.

Of course, not knowing is utterly okay in Wagner's fictive world. In fact, it's key. A clear example: In "Shadow Puppets" (2017), we are surprised by fragments of two silhouetted figures on a centralized white sheet upon which a muted scene unfolds. Arms and hands reach toward each other. Longingly: are they lovers? Aggressively: are they enemies? What secrets hide behind the sheet?

In this same canvas, a stark, ordered, blue and yellow(ish) tiled floor (a signature color combo of the peaceful, meditative Vermeer — so different from the atmosphere we are presented with here) — lays the groundwork for nearby debris strewn throughout. Similarly, in Wagner's "Metropolis" (2017), chessboard-like squares set the stage for the jam-packed tumult above. Buried in plain sight, an ensemble of intentionally way-too-small beach umbrellas and chaise lounges loll oasis-like beneath a pumpjack oil derrick. Oddball contrasts rub shoulders. The curling folds of high-pitched emerald-and-blue drapery are coupled with low-key generic boxes; transparent buildings weave through trees; and rainbow hues butt up against shale and mud, as shapes and colors interact the way one might imagine a chess game played between the likes of, say, Agnes Martin and Wangechi Mutu.





Virginia Wagner, "Metropolis" (2017), ink and oil on canvas, 44 x 52 inches

Vermeer portrays life's order, beauty, and elegance. So does Wagner, but she frames them within an altogether different context. She seduces us into looking at them from reverse, from the starting line (or, better, endgame) of struggle and death. It's all about the discomfort of certain points of view.

Same with Brueghel. His "Hunters" trudge their way back home. We're close enough to hear their boots crunch virgin snow. And those hunting dogs ... I pity their paws. The men's faces hurt. It's that cold. Were there any successful kills? Will there be meat for their families tonight? Doesn't matter. That's not the point. The point is, struggle and death are part of life's stalemate, and that's what Wagner's dark, difficult paintings are about. Her shadow puppet play and the deceptive sweetness of the lighter end of her palette are companions to Brueghel's children and other townspeople skating across a playground of ice ... especially if you imagine there being serious cracks beneath their blades.



Realistic facts / surreal fictions / realistic fictions / surreal facts: Virginia Wagner shuffles them like a card shark. These fantastical, poignant, sometimes creepy pictures are fraught with conflict. I shouldn't want to look at them so closely or for so long, but I do. The images shouldn't work. But they do, masterfully. That's because Wagner is in firm control of her craft. And because she is an exquisite storyteller of great ambition who tells impossible tales that we believe. At its best, this gifted artist's work feels genuinely real, despite — or perhaps because of — how dreadfully she allows us to see.

*Virginia Wagner: Metropolis continues at the Kate Oh Gallery (50 East 72nd Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through December 9.*