

Nancy Macko: Flowers, Bees, and a Passion for Justice

Nancy Macko is an artist who takes photographs of flowers and makes prints and installations, usually related to nature; almost all of the work intimates her strong interest in the world of ecology, in particular the world of bees; and the strong desire to promote equality for women, with a special emphasis on female artists. Born in New York, and educated at the University of Wisconsin and Berkeley, Macko has spent most of her adult life in Southern California, where she is professor of art at Scripps College. She is an artist dedicated to revealing the subtle intimacies of nature; using a macro lens to capture the details of flowers. In doing so, Macko also establishes a striking metaphor for the erotic life of women, a subject that often holds sway in her art. In conjunction with her artistic activities, Macko has been a strong advocate of feminist causes. Without transparently communicating her political concerns, the artwork can be read in light of her social passion: both her flower imagery and her interest in the lives of the bees presents, by implication, an alternative to the ongoing crisis in ecology and the expanding concerns of feminist art. Thus, Macko is an artist for whom aesthetics and justice are intertwined; her view in art, though, is implicit rather than overtly expressed.

The artist began taking close-ups of bee-attracting flora in her backyard, and is now documenting other species in different regions of the US: most recently the Rocky Mountains and the northeast. The delicacy of her images is undeniable; the colors and crevices of the blooms are extremely seductive, clearly making reference to the female sex yet in conjunction with the role of the bee as pollinator and facilitator of sexual pleasures. The power of this work does not stem only from its erotic implications; actually, the imagery extends to nature's own erotic possibilities, which are certainly true as biological fact. Color is also extremely important to Macko's work: images of desert marigolds and California poppies explode with an intensity of yellow and orange, and some of the more recent images depict the bees themselves.

In 2015, Macko presented the exhibition *The Fragile Bee*, which included the installation *Honey Teachings: In the Mother Tongue of the Bees*. This wall installation is composed of 104 hexagonal wooden panels displaying bee imagery. Sometimes statements about the bees are included: "Worker bees are born to serve the greater good." Installed on the wall, the individual panels look very much like a hive, completing the implicit metaphor of the project. Macko is truly a utopian artist who borrows from nature to deliver sharp points about the possibility of a better human society. In this way, she belongs to the highly American practice of joining art to politics, both private and public. Her botanicals command respect as remarkable visions of the hidden intimacies of nature, while her bee imagery is both beautiful and indicative of a larger purpose: the transformation, through art, of a patriarchal society. This topic is to some extent a dream originating from the imagination yet it is also a template for a just society.

Macko's work extends to fine art prints and her photographs are clearly related to the 2007 suite of etchings entitled *In the Garden of the Bee Priestess*. These prints combine abstract, decorative imagery with specific depictions of bees and flora, thus bridging some of the interests of 1980s Pattern art with a more contemporary view. In *Nirvana for the Future: The Divine Reading Lesson Series* (2011), Macko employs hive imagery and combines it with a regularly appearing image, an arrow-like shape which turns out to be a plumb bob but stands in for an ancient matriarchal goddess— another strong interest of the artist is

matriarchal societies. These prints are highly skilled, eclectic gatherings of images taken across time, across cultures, across geographies. Their collective power is not only moving, but also political; Macko seems determined to upend the conventional account of historical culture and read it in light of feminist insurgency.

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