

Of Grace and Connection: Nancy Macko's *The Fragile Bee* Project

By **Dominique Nahas** ©2017

Since the mid 1990s artist Nancy Macko has considered the bee as her muse, her focal point of contemplation, interest and inspiration. Decades later, through *The Fragile Bee* project, we recognize for a fact that, for Macko as eco-feminist and visual poet, everything that circulates and constellates around the bee, and, by extension, the apiary and world apiculture, gives off endless associations and insights into holistic consciousness. The world of the bee has continued to this day to spark Macko's profound fascination with humanistic ideals of communitarianism, gender equality, collective effort, the ethic of industriousness, and doing "good." These concerns have been matched by the artist's interests in the relationships between art and technology, science, evolution and ecology.

Nancy Macko's *The Fragile Bee* project consists of interconnected multi-disciplinary and multi-media installations: *Honey Teachings: In the Mother Tongue of the Bees* (2015), *Meadow* (2015), *Botanical Portraits* (2014-5), and two earlier video and ambient sound installations *Lore of the Bee Priestess* (2004) and *Bee Stories* (2006). *Bee Stories* and *Lore of the Bee Priestess* explore feminine consciousness and archetypes. Essentially narrating a woman's odyssey of change and transformation Macko uses a kaleidoscope effect to fracture layered discontinuous narratives (pertaining to the bee as the exemplar of, bee priestesses, and bee lore) into hexagonal shapes that give these videos a hallucinatory other-worldly quality.

Honey Teachings: In the Mother Tongue of the Bees is a massive and intricate wall-work consisting of 104 hexagonal panels, reminiscent of individual hive cells and the overall entomological architecture of the hive itself. Nancy Macko has constructed the panels using a variety of woods including cumala, bird's eye maple, yellow heart and birchwood plywood. Each panel, nearly a foot wide, is faced with often layered imagery: close-ups of bees in the hive set against their prism-like cells, bees in the process of pollinating atop of blossoms, references to hexagon worship, sacred geometry, visual allusions to goddess worship, photographs pertaining to hive culture, and terrifying imagery of the devastating effects of hive collapse. Several of the blondish wood panels are left blank, serving as visual pauses, suggestive of honey-filled cells. Additionally, Macko includes terse texts drawn from scientific reports, apiology research papers, or mass-media news sources that are imprinted onto several panels and also directly on the wall. *Honey Teachings'* panels seem to hover and congregate in groups across the wall, recurring at different tessellating intervals and at various

heights along the wall's 12' by 30' surface, animating it as if a swarm of bees has entered the exhibition space and filled it with transcendent, vitalizing energy.

Botanical Portraits are a series of 30" x 40" photographs of nine indigenous, drought-resistant, bee-attracting, flowering plants of Southern California mounted on cintra and faced with plexiglass. Each portrait has a towering presence offset by Macko's insertion of hexagonal facets onto the picture plane of each photograph. These photographic insertions at times depict, through intimate magnifications, the intricate inner reproductive parts of each flower through its life cycle, serving as punctuating reminders to the viewer of the implicative loop of macro-micro interconnectedness between the dynamic processes of the delicate inner workings of the flower as a single organism, and its connection to the cycles of life and to a larger fragile botanic ecosystem of which, we, as humans, are part.

Meadow (2015), an extensive wall-sized digital photograph extending 12 by 36 feet is an immersive art work that seems to complement *The Honey Teachings* and its individual panels. In *Meadow* perceptual shifts tantalize the eye in the form of hexagonal forms that appear to float against the meadow background affording the viewer to stop and take-in Nature in small movements: we see close-ups of rapturously lit and detailed flowers, each hexagon portraying floral portraits appear as portals, floating as they do in front of the carefully sutured digitized parts of the overall meadow field. What is inferred are the connections and relationships between the hive, pollination and the marvelous activity by which Nature revitalizes and beautifies Mother Earth.

The Fragile Bee weaves together Nancy Macko's exploration of the emergent interconnections between nature, science and culture using a variety of visual mediums and approaches perfected by years of professional practice. *The Fragile Bee* project is a *gesamtkunstwerk*, an immersive tour-de force permeated by affective, conceptual and aesthetic impact that is hard to describe. You have to be there to feel how it works on you: body, mind and soul.

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Dominique Nahas is an independent critic and curator based in Brooklyn, New York

A former museum director and curator, he has written about, curated and organized exhibitions of note such as the first American traveling retrospective of leading feminist artist, Nancy Spero. Nahas also served as visiting critic and critic-in-residence at numerous institutions including the Rhode Island School of Design, Yale University, Virginia Commonwealth University, Cranbrook Academy, Parsons, Boston Museum School, Ringling College, Montclair State University, Michigan State University, and the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. Nahas is currently teaching in the Fine Arts Department at Pratt Institute.

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