

Elements of the natural, 1950-1992 : selections from the drawing collection, the Museum of Modern Art, May 7- August 25, 1998

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Elements of the Natural: 1950–1992

Selections from the Drawings Collection

The Museum of Modern Art, May 7–August 25, 1998

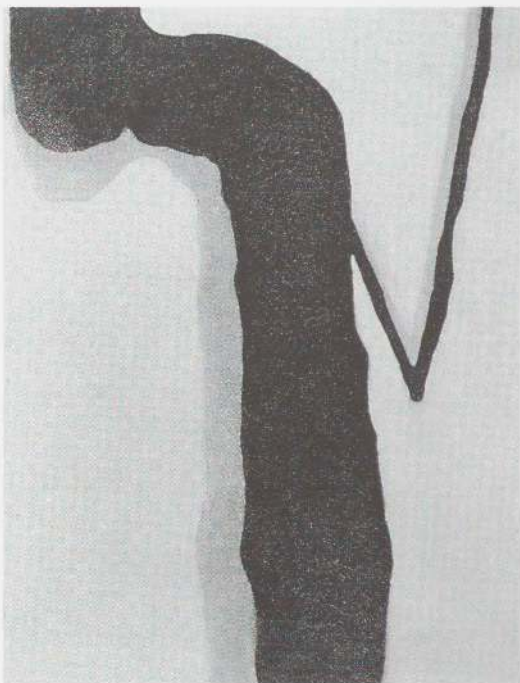
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From the beginnings of modern art, a variety of artists, most notably Paul Cézanne and Claude Monet, found in nature a primary source of artistic inspiration. Soon afterwards, nature as subject matter was frequently abandoned by the avant-garde in preference of the drama of urban society and the new stylistic challenges that it provided. The spectacle of nature, most often defined by landscape, was consequently relegated to a secondary status in the hierarchy of artistic genres. While not entirely dismissed by the modern artist, nature as subject now seemed, in many ways, to be in direct conflict with the notion of modern art.

Emphasis on both the material and form of the industrial landscape continued to color the iconography of modern art until just after World War II. It is during this period, shadowed by the omnipresence of the atomic bomb—considered to be the most horrific product of industrial technology—that many artists of the era began to question the values of progress in which they had placed their faith. Amid this atmosphere of nuclear anxiety, these artists began to return to

the natural world for inspiration, newly appreciating its immaterial beauty, as well as its impermanence: a quality suddenly urgent in light of the absolute destructive capabilities of modern technology.

Focusing on the years of 1950–1992, *Elements of the Natural* begins during this



Georgia O'Keeffe. *Drawing X*. 1959. Charcoal, 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (63.2 x 47.3 cm). Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (by exchange), 1972.

period when the natural world once again became raw material for creativity and continues through the contemporary era. The works included are not to be considered as part of any organized "back to nature" movement, nor was the selection based on any stylistic similarities or progression. Rather, all share a common element: an individual search on the part of the artist to capture the essence of nature.

Under the rubric of "landscape art," Milton Avery's *Dune Bushes* (1958), Joan Mitchell's *Untitled* (1992), and Vija Celmins's *Untitled (Ocean)* (1970) capture the timeless essence of the landscape theme. However, their depictions of the tangible world of land and water are informed by a new vocabulary: simplification, abstraction, and elimination of spatial referents. In contrast, Ellen Phelan's works from the *Loon Lake* series (1983) and Per Kirkeby's two *Untitled* works (both 1977) also depict an essentialist view of the landscape but express concern with the intangible elements of light and atmosphere as translated through texture and color.

Artists such as Jim Dine and Anish Kapoor, however, obliterate the surrounding landscape and focus instead on the single object in nature. Their artistic concerns stretch beyond the mere transcription of nature's beauty. Dine's depiction of a solitary tree in *A Tree that Shatters the Dancing* (1980), as well as Anish Kapoor's vegetal imagery in *Untitled (Red Roots)* (1990) become archetypes used throughout their oeuvres as devices for stylistic experimentation. Ultimately, transcendence of the object depicted occurs through each artist's expressive use of

color. Using deep blues and grays, Dine's tree becomes an object of both confrontation and contemplation. By employing blood-red hues, Kapoor successfully collapses the boundaries between the human and the natural world; his roots resemble veins and capillaries, evoking the spiritual persona of "mother earth."

Other artists included in the exhibition do not represent the landscape but choose instead to physically engage it as part of the artwork. Jean Dubuffet's *Botanical Element: Baptism of Fire* (1959), Richard Long's *Untitled* (1992), and John Cage's *River Rock and Smoke 4/3/90 #5* (1990) all employ nature and natural elements as the medium. Dubuffet's collage composed of densely layered leaves and Long's substitution of river mud for pigment present the tangible elements of the earth, while Cage, in contrast, uses the intangible element of smoke to imprint the ethereal and swirling structures within his drawing. Suffused with natural processes, Cage's watercolor demonstrates the interaction of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

Represented by three grid formations that she entitles *Mountain* (1960), *Red Bird* (1964), and *Wood* (1965), Agnes Martin is an example of an artist who looks beyond the exterior design of the natural object, choosing instead to give objective form to her subjective responses to the natural world. In Georgia O'Keeffe's *Drawing X* (1959) and Ellsworth Kelly's *Pine Branch* (1950), nature has been distilled and decoded to an extent that its underlying structure is revealed. Stripped down to their essence, O'Keeffe's aerial view of a river and Kelly's solitary branch express in their simplicity a stark but precise beauty.



Jim Dine, *A Tree that Shatters the Dancing*. 1980. Synthetic polymer paint, synthetic polymer spray paint, charcoal, and pastel on cut-and-pasted paper, 56 1/2 x 50 1/2" (143.4 x 127.5 cm) (irreg.). Gift of Nancy and Jim Dine in memory of Myron Orloffsky, 1982.

While the drawings of O'Keeffe and Kelly demonstrate the elimination of ornament to the point of purification, Christopher Wool's *Untitled* (1991), Yayoi Kusama's *Untitled* (1952), and Brice Marden's *Rain* (1991) celebrate that aesthetic artifice which composes nature's own patterning. Whether portraying the repetitive design of a creeping vine through the technique of stamping (Wool), the density of a flower's interior through the multiplication of nets and dots (Kusama), or the shifting motion of wind-driven rain through calligraphic line (Marden), each artist explicitly conveys the decorative qualities of the natural world.

Yet another dimension of this exhibition focuses on the interest in nature's microcosm. Tony Smith's and Terry Winters's fascination with biology and botany leads them to describe that part of nature which may only be seen from under a microscope. While Smith presents the building blocks of nature, as exemplified by *Untitled* (1953-55), drawings from Winters's important *Schema* series (1985-86) highlight plant structures, spores, and botanical diagrams. Devoid of idealization, these abstract and ordered botanical specimens evoke nature's eternal cycle of germination, growth, death, and regeneration.

Far from the interior world of nature defined by Smith and Winters, "Earth Artists" represented in the exhibition concern themselves with the larger vista of the natural environment. Interest in "earth art" emerged when artists like Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer ceased to

view the landscape as a natural element reserved for observation, but rather as something to be physically manipulated and rearranged. Their unique sculptural efforts, located within the landscape itself, deny both the traditional boundaries of the museum and the materials of art. Drawings included in this exhibition such as Heizer's *Field Painting No. 2* (1968) and Smithson's *Fossil Quarry Mirror (Outdoor and Indoor Proposal)* (1968) serve as conceptual "blueprints" for their earth sculptures.

Thus, through a variety of guises and modes of depiction, the drawings included in *Elements of the Natural* defy the traditional concept of "landscape" through their unique portrayals of the natural world. By combining both the external and the internal concepts of nature, these artists no longer simply transcribe the natural world, but rather, reinterpret it according to their personal responses; manipulate it for stylistic experimentation; employ it as medium; and even strip it, redesign it, and break it down into its most minute elements. While simultaneously expressing both the simple splendor of nature as well as its universality, the artists represented in *Elements of the Natural* demonstrate a continuing affinity on the part of the modern artist to address nature and absorb her lessons, transforming them into pure artistic visions.

Elements of the Natural: 1950-1992 was organized by Kathleen Curry and Kristin Helmick-Brunet, Curatorial Assistants, Department of Drawings.

Elements of the Natural: 1950-1992

Selections from the Drawings Collection

All works are from the collection of The Museum of Modern Art and are on paper unless otherwise indicated.

Milton Avery

American, 1885-1965
Dune Bushes. 1958
Watercolor and gouache on paper mounted on board
22½ x 30½" (56.5 x 76.9 cm)
Purchase, 1982

Joseph Beuys

German, 1921-1986
Untitled. 1947 and 1970s
Pencil on four sheets of paper mounted on painted wood panel
11½ x 38½" (30.2 x 98.2 cm) (overall)
Gift of Agnes Gund and Ronald S. Lauder, 1990

Dynamis 3. 1960
Oil, pencil, and ink
16½ x 11½" (41.5 x 29.5 cm)
Purchase, 1983

John Cage

American, 1912-1992
River Rock and Smoke 4/13/90 #5. 1990
Watercolor on smoked paper
52½ x 15" (133.3 x 38.1 cm)
Gift of Sarah-Ann and Werner H. Kramarsky, 1995

Vija Celmins

American, born Latvia 1939
Untitled (*Ocean*). 1970
Pencil
14½ x 18½" (36 x 48 cm)
Mrs. Florene M. Schoenborn Fund, 1970

Christo (Christo Javacheff)

American, born Bulgaria 1935; to United States 1964
Packed Tree (Project). 1968
Cut, pasted, and stapled cardboard, polyethylene, cloth, twine, pencil, charcoal, colored pencil, and wash on board
22½ x 28 x ½" (56.1 x 71.1 x 1.3 cm)
Gift of the artist, 1968

Jim Dine

American, born 1935
A Tree that Shatters the Dancing. 1980
Synthetic polymer paint, synthetic polymer spray paint, charcoal, and pastel on cut-and-pasted paper
56½ x 50½" (143.4 x 127.5 cm) (irreg.)
Gift of Nancy and Jim Dine in memory of Myron Orlofsky, 1982



Joan Mitchell. *Untitled*. 1992. Pastel. 29½ x 21½" (75 x 55.2 cm). Purchased with funds given by Mr. and Mrs. Henry R. Kravis, 1996

Six drawings from *Cold Key West Winter*. 1981-83
Charcoal and lithographic crayon on handmade pink paper
25½ x 16½" (57.2 x 41.2 cm) each
Gift of the artist in memory of Myron Orlofsky, 1983

Jean Dubuffet

French, 1901-1985
Tumultuous Landscape. 1952
Pen and ink
18½ x 23½" (47.5 x 60.5 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lester Francis Avnet, 1968

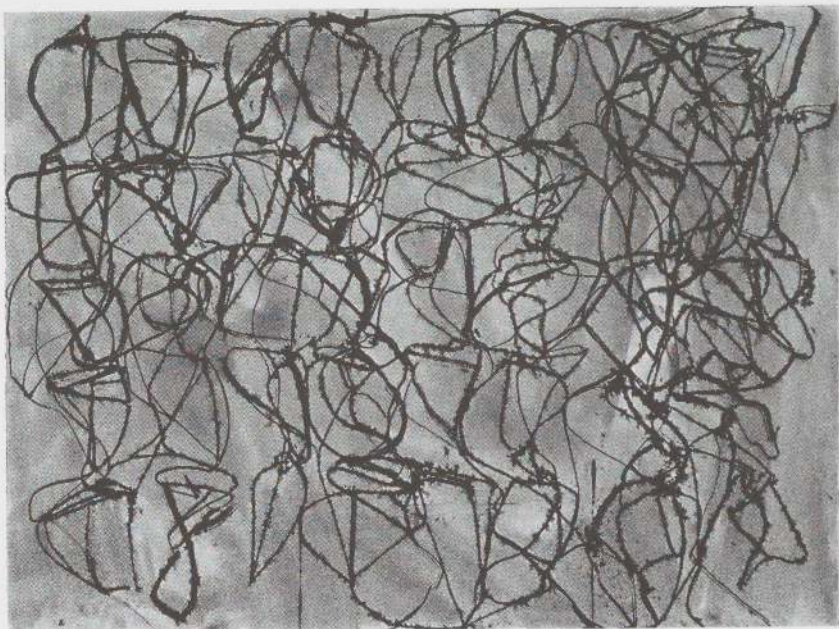
Botanical Element: Baptism of Fire. 1959
Assemblage of leaves with oil on paper
21½ x 27½" (54.9 x 68.9 cm)
The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, 1967

Helen Frankenthaler

American, born 1928
Great Meadows. 1951
Watercolor and synthetic polymer paint
22 x 30½" (56 x 77.4 cm)
Purchase, 1984

Hamish Fulton

British, born 1946
Mountain Skyline Fourteen Days Walking Fourteen Nights Camping Wind River Range Wyoming. 1989. 1989
Pencil and soil
24½ x 26½" (62.8 x 66.8 cm)
Purchase, 1990



Brice Marden, *Rain*, 1991. Black and colored ink, 25 1/4 x 34 1/4" (65.4 x 87.2 cm), Gift of The Edward John Noble Foundation and Ronald S. Lauder, 1992

Michael Heizer

American, born 1944
Field Painting No. 2, 1968
 Ballpoint pen, graphite, wash,
 and cut-and-pasted paper with
 typewritten text
 22 1/4 x 28 1/2" (56.2 x 71.3 cm)
 Gift of Carol O. Selle, 1980

Anish Kapoor

Indian, born 1954
 Untitled (*Red Leaf*), 1987
 Gouache and pencil
 13 3/4 x 12 1/4" (35 x 31.1 cm)
 Gift of Patricia and Morris
 Orden and an anonymous
 donor, 1994

Untitled (*Red Roots*), 1990
 Gouache and ink
 20 x 19 1/2" (50.9 x 49.5 cm)
 Gift of Patricia and Morris
 Orden and an anonymous
 donor, 1994

Ellsworth Kelly

American, born 1923
Pine Branch, 1950
 Pencil
 16 1/2 x 20 1/4" (41.9 x 51.5 cm)
 Gift of the artist, 1997

Per Kirkeby

Danish, born 1938
 Untitled, 1977
 Watercolor on parchment paper
 16 1/4 x 12" (41.2 x 30.5 cm)
 Purchased with funds
 bequeathed by Monawee
 Allen Richards, 1996

Untitled, 1977
 Watercolor on parchment
 paper
 13 3/4 x 12 1/2" (35 x 31.8 cm)
 Purchased with funds given by
 Agnes Gund, 1996

Yves Klein

French, 1928–1962
Colored Fire: Blue, Pink, 1962
 Dry pigment in synthetic resin
 with gold paint on asbestos-
 coated paper, partially charred
 24 1/2 x 19" (62.1 x 48.3 cm)
 Gift of the Scaler Foundation
 and purchase, 1984

Yayoi Kusama

Japanese, born 1929
 Untitled, 1952
 Pastel and ballpoint pen
 14 7/8 x 11 1/2" (37.9 x 29.4 cm)
 Gift of Patricia and Morris
 Orden in memory of Michèle
 Fox, 1996

Richard Long

British, born 1945
Untitled. 1992
Mississippi mud
78 x 43" (198.2 x 109.4 cm)
Gift of Agnes Gund, 1992

Leo Manso

American, 1914-1993
Earth 2. 1962
Cut-and-pasted painted fabric
and paper on cardboard
22 7/8 x 19 1/4" (83.8 x 50.7 cm)
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Ronald
Neschis, 1963

Brice Marden

American, born 1938
Rain. 1991
Black and colored ink
25 3/4 x 34 1/4" (65.4 x 87.2 cm)
Gift of The Edward John Noble
Foundation and Ronald S.
Lauder, 1992

Agnes Martin

American, born Canada 1912
Mountain. 1960
Pen and ink and pencil
9 1/2 x 11 1/2" (24 x 30.4 cm)
Ruth Vollmer Bequest, 1983

Red Bird. 1964

Pen and red ink and pencil
12 1/4 x 11 1/2" (31.1 x 30.4 cm)
Gift of Mrs. Bliss Parkinson,
1966

Wood. 1965

Pen and ink and pencil
10 1/2 x 10 1/2" (27.7 x 27.7 cm)
Eugene and Clare Thaw Fund,
1964

Mario Merz

Italian, born 1925
*Blossom (Prehistoric Wind
from Iced Mountain)*. 1982
Oil, spray paint, charcoal, pas-
tel, clay, branch, pushpins on
burlap on brown paper mount-
ed on cardboard
52 1/2 x 75 1/2" (134.1 x 192 cm)
Gift of Charles B. Benenson,
1983

Joan Mitchell

American, 1926-1992
Untitled. 1992
Pastel
29 1/2 x 21 3/4" (75 x 55.2 cm)
Purchased with funds given by
Mr. and Mrs. Henry R. Kravis,
1996

Malcolm Morley

American, born Great Britain
1931
Landscape. 1983
Watercolor
19 x 24" (48.2 x 60.9 cm)
Purchase, 1988

Georgia O'Keeffe

American, 1887-1986
Drawing X. 1959
Charcoal
24 1/2 x 18 1/2" (63.2 x 47.3 cm)
Gift of Abby Aldrich Rocke-
feller (by exchange), 1972

Gakyo Osawa

Japanese, 1890-1953
The Deep Pool. c. 1953
Brush and ink
26 1/2 x 54 1/2" (68.3 x 138.1 cm)
Japanese House Fund, 1954



Terry Winters. *Schema (63)*. 1985-86.
Oilstick and graphite. 12 x 8 1/2" (30.4 x
21.9 cm). Gift of Lily Auchincloss (by
exchange) and of Richard E. Salomon,
1988

Giuseppe Penone

Italian, born 1947
Untitled (No. 1). 1981
Cut-and-pasted paper,
gouache, charcoal, and pen
and ink
9 x 9 1/2" (22.8 x 23 cm)
Gift of the artist, 1983

Untitled (No. 5). 1981

Gouache, charcoal, and pen
and ink
9 1/2 x 9 1/2" (23 x 23 cm)
Gift of the artist, 1983

Ellen Phelan

American, born 1943
*Late Afternoon Across the
Lake from Loon Lake: Eleven
Drawings*. 1983
Gouache
10 1/2 x 9 1/2" (27.6 x 23.2 cm)
Gift of the artist in memory of
her father, Thomas Edward
Phelan, 1984

**Last Light from Loon Lake:
Eleven Drawings**. 1983

Gouache
19 1/2 x 13 1/2" (50.5 x 34.6 cm)
Gift of the artist in memory of
her father, Thomas Edward
Phelan, 1984

Tony Smith

American, 1912-1980
Untitled. 1953-55
Charcoal
31 1/2 x 39 1/2" (80 x 99.4 cm)
Purchased with funds given by
Agnes Gund, 1996

Robert Smithson

American, 1938-1973
*Fossil Quarry Mirror (Outdoor
and Indoor Project)*. 1968
Pencil
13 3/4 x 10 1/4" (34.8 x 27.2 cm)
Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd
Fund, 1971



Helen Frankenthaler. *Great Meadows*. 1951. Watercolor and synthetic polymer paint. 22 x 30 1/2" (56 x 77.4 cm). Purchase, 1984

Pat Steir

American, born 1940
 Untitled (from the series *From the Sea*). 1985
 Graphite, powdered graphite, charcoal, gesso, pencil, and blue ink
 14' 3" x 60 1/4" (434.5 x 153 cm) (irreg.)
 Gift of Charles B. Benenson (by exchange), 1986

Mark Tobey

American, 1890–1976
Wild Field. 1959
 Tempera on cardboard
 27 1/8 x 28" (68.9 x 71.1 cm)
 The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, 1967

Terry Winters

American, born 1949
Dark Plants 12. 1982
 Oil crayon and charcoal
 41 1/4 x 29 1/8" (106 x 75.7 cm)
 Gift of Margo Paul Ernst, 1982

Schema (55). 1985–86
 Watercolor, gouache, and graphite
 12 1/8 x 8 5/8" (30.7 x 21.9 cm)
 Gift of Lily Auchincloss (by exchange) and of Richard E. Salomon, 1988

Schema (63). 1985–86
 Oilstick and graphite
 12 x 8 5/8" (30.4 x 21.9 cm)
 Gift of Lily Auchincloss (by exchange) and of Richard E. Salomon, 1988

Schema (65). 1985–86
 Watercolor and graphite
 12 1/4 x 8 5/8" (31.1 x 21.9 cm)
 Gift of Lily Auchincloss (by exchange) and of Richard E. Salomon, 1988

Christopher Wool

American, born 1955
 Untitled. 1991
 Alkyd paint, stamped
 52 x 40" (132.2 x 101.6 cm)
 Gift of Charles B. Benenson, 1992