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The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—from our founding in 1929 to the present—is available online. It includes exhibition catalogues, primary documents, installation views, and an index of participating artists.
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
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.
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
22 1/4 x 30 1/4" (56.5 x 76.9 cm)
Purchase, 1982

**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
22 1/4 x 28 x 1 1/4" (56.1 x 71.1 x 1.3 cm)
Purchase, 1983

**Joseph Beuys**
German, 1921–1986
*Untitled*. 1947 and 1970s
Pencil on four sheets of paper mounted on painted wood panel
11 1/4 x 36 1/4" (30.2 x 98.2 cm)
(overall)
Gift of Agnes Gund and Ronald S. Lauder, 1990

*Dynamis 3*. 1960
Oil, pencil, and ink
16 1/2 x 11 3/4" (41.5 x 29.5 cm)
Purchase, 1983

**Dynamis 3*. 1960
Oil, pencil, and ink
16 1/2 x 11 3/4" (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
52 1/4 x 15" (133.3 x 38.1 cm)
Gift of Sarah-Ann and Werner H. Kramarsky, 1995

**Hamish Fulton**
British, born 1946
Pencil and soil
24 3/4 x 26 1/2" (62.8 x 67.2 cm)
Purchase, 1990

**Vija Celmins**
American, born Latvia 1939
*Untitled (Ocean)*. 1970
Pencil
14 3/4 x 18 1/2" (36 x 48 cm)
Mrs. Florene M. Schoenborn Fund, 1970

**Vija Celmins**
American, born Latvia 1939
*Untitled (Ocean)*. 1970
Pencil
14 3/4 x 18 1/2" (36 x 48 cm)
Mrs. Florene M. Schoenborn Fund, 1970

**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
56 1/4 x 50 1/4" (143.4 x 127.5 cm)
(irreg.)
Gift of Nancy and Jim Dine in memory of Myron Orlofsky, 1982

**Jean Dubuffet**
French, 1901–1985
*Tumultuous Landscape*. 1952
Pen and ink
13 3/4 x 23 3/4" (47.5 x 60.5 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lester Francis Avnet, 1968

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

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French, 1901–1985
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Pen and ink
13 3/4 x 23 3/4" (47.5 x 60.5 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lester Francis Avnet, 1968

**Helen Frankenthaler**
American, born 1928
*Great Meadows*. 1961
Watercolor and synthetic polymer paint
22 x 30 1/4" (56 x 77.4 cm)
Purchase, 1984

**Jean Dubuffet**
French, 1901–1985
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Pen and ink
13 3/4 x 23 3/4" (47.5 x 60.5 cm)
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Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lester Francis Avnet, 1968

**Jean Dubuffet**
French, 1901–1985
*Tumultuous Landscape*. 1952
Pen and ink
13 3/4 x 23 3/4" (47.5 x 60.5 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lester Francis Avnet, 1968
Michael Heizer
American, born 1944
Field Painting No. 2. 1968
Ballpoint pen, graphite, wash, and cut-and-pasted paper with typewritten text
22 1/2 x 26 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


Ellsworth Kelly
American, born 1923
Pine Branch. 1950
Pencil
15 1/4 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

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 3/8 x 11 3/4" (37.9 x 29.4 cm)
Gift of Patricia and Morris Orden in memory of Michele Fox, 1996
Richard Long  
British, born 1945  
*Untitled.* 1992  
Mississippi mud  
78 x 43" (193.2 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% x 19%" (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% x 34%" (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% x 11%" (24 x 30.4 cm)  
Ruth Vollmer Bequest, 1983

Malcolm Morley  
American, born Great Britain 1931  
*Landscape.* 1963  
Watercolor  
19 x 24" (48.2 x 60.9 cm)  
Purchase, 1938

Georgia O’Keeffe  
American, 1887–1986  
*Drawing X.* 1959  
Charcoal  
24% x 18%" (63.2 x 47.3 cm)  
Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (by exchange), 1972

Ogakya Osawa  
Japanese, 1890–1953  
*The Deep Pool.* c. 1953  
Brush and ink  
26% x 9%" (68.3 x 23 cm)  
Gift of the artist, 1983

Joan Mitchell  
American, 1926–1992  
*Untitled.* 1992  
Pastel  
29% x 21%" (75 x 55.2 cm)  
Purchased with funds given by Mr. and Mrs. Henry R. Kravis, 1996

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

Malcolm Morley  
American, born Great Britain 1931  
*Earth 2.* 1962  
Cut-and-pasted painted fabric and paper on cardboard  
22% x 19%" (83.8 x 50.7 cm)  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Ronald Neschis, 1963

Brice Marden  
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American, born Canada 1912  
*Mountain.* 1960  
Pen and ink and pencil  
9% x 11%" (24 x 30.4 cm)  
Ruth Vollmer Bequest, 1983

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

Gakyu Osawa  
Japanese, 1890–1953  
*The Deep Pool.* c. 1953  
Brush and ink  
26% x 9%" (68.3 x 23 cm)  
Gift of the artist, 1983

Tony Smith  
American, 1912–1980  
*Untitled.* 1953–55  
Charcoal  
31% x 39%" (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% x 10%" (34.8 x 27.2 cm)  
Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Fund, 1971

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

Terry Winters  
*Schema (63).* 1985–86  
Oilstick and graphite  
12 x 8%" (30.4 x 21.9 cm)  
Gift of Lily Auchincloss (by exchange) and of Richard E. Salomon, 1988
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 60½" (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
27½ 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
41⅞ x 29½" (106 x 75.7 cm)
Gift of Margo Paul Ernst, 1982

Watercolor, gouache, and graphite
12½ x 8¾" (31.7 x 21.9 cm)
Gift of Lily Auchincloss (by exchange) and of Richard E. Salomon, 1988

Schema (63). 1985–86
Oilstic and graphite
12 x 8½" (30.4 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

This brochure is made possible by The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art.