
CONTAINERS FOR CARE

New Museum Kids Menu provides families with activities to learn about contemporary art and ideas at home.

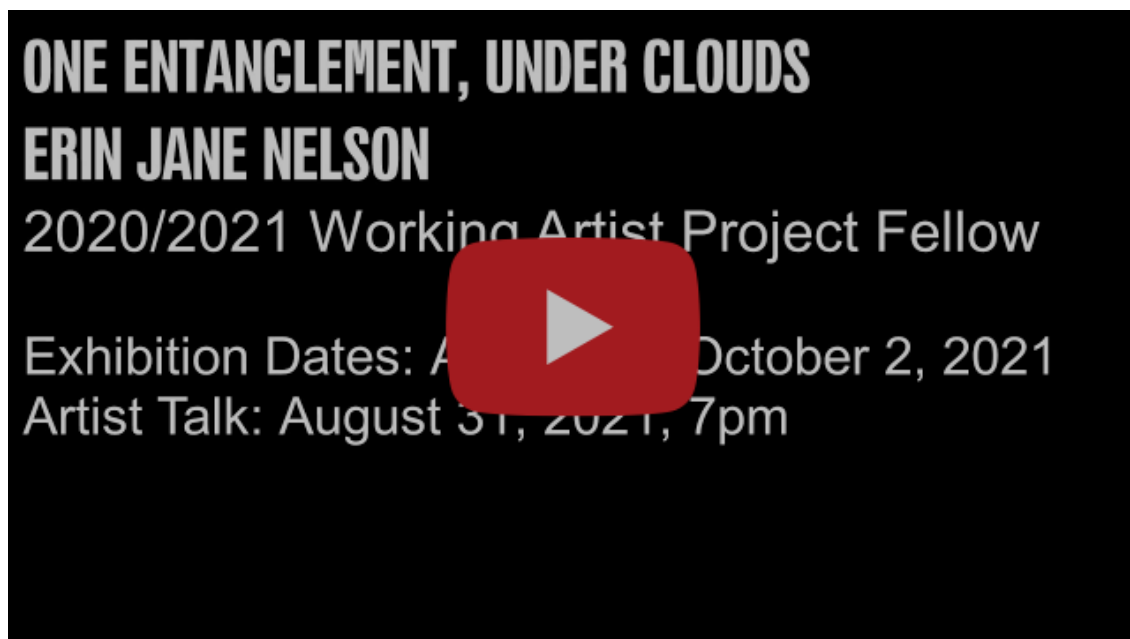


Erin Jane Nelson (b. 1989, Neenah, WI, United States; lives and works in Atlanta, GA) is an artist whose large-scale wall sculptures, created for the New Museum 2021 Triennial, wrestle with anxiety about climate change. The sculptures are composed of hand-built ceramics that incorporate collected organic materials as well as found and archival photographs. Nelson’s imaginative approach allows her to rethink how we exist “in relationship to the land, to a community, to a system.” Rather than create a scientific document to represent systems and environmental decay, Nelson thinks in terms of nurturing relationships and adaptation, and is drawn to clay as a container to hold space for something “vital, living, useful, tender, valuable.” Combining the visual languages of craft and photography, Nelson’s objects foreground overarching concerns about the climate crisis, particularly its impact on the Gulf Coast, and the area’s shifting sociocultural landscape. Nelson’s use of organic materials from the region, including clay, pigments, and natural elements, combined with the tactility of the works—built by hand and slowly developed over time—ground the artist’s broad concerns in physical objects.

“When I’m thinking about care, fertility, or nurturing, what I’m trying to do is move past a place of grief and paralysis about climate collapse and into a space where I’m imagining new forms of existing in relationship to the land, to a community, and to a system. The way that I’m doing that is through something that feels very abstract and dislocated from community and place, but that comes from a desire to generate or build a new space that can contain a lot of anxiety and self-accountability, a container that can hold the complicated feeling of being a person in the world, however utterly fraught that world is. Loving something as silly as a piece of clay, which is basically a piece of ground, to me comes from a place of wonder and wanting to create and hold space for something that we don’t always think of as vital, living, useful, tender, valuable.”

— Erin Jane Nelson, interview in the exhibition catalogue for the 2021 New Museum Triennial, "Soft Water Hard Stone"

Learn more about Nelson’s art-making process incorporating ceramics, found photographs, and organic materials:



Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia

KEY WORDS

- **nurturing:** any kind of caretaking, although most often used to refer to parents and other adults caring for young children; nurturing can include care for other people, yourself, plants, animals, a garden, or the earth and natural environment
- **assemblage:** artwork made from mixed materials, most often discarded and found objects

- **organic material:** matter that has come from a recently living organism; capable of decay; in chemistry, this material is identified by its chemical structure, carbon-based compounds
- **climate change:** changes to global and/or regional climate (weather conditions over time in a given region), including rising temperatures attributed to increases of atmospheric carbon dioxide from human reliance on fossil fuels; evidence of climate change includes phenomena like rising temperatures across the United States, plant and animal species declining and endangered by extinction, frequent extreme weather events such as flooding and hurricanes, and the severity of wildfires in the western U.S.

START WITH ART: ERIN JANE NELSON



Looking at the two images of *Pollinators Dilemma* (2021) in this Kids Menu (the image directly above is a closeup detail), discuss the following questions:

- How would you describe the overall shape of this artwork? How would you describe the shape of the individual pieces and how they relate to one another?
- What do you notice about the surfaces of each shape? Are they all the same color?

- What pictures and objects do you see collected within each shape? How do they relate to the natural world?
- The title is *Pollinator's Dilemma*. A pollinator, often an insect or bird, carries pollen (a powdery material in flowers) from one plant to another to fertilize plant egg cells. The egg cells become seeds for new plants to grow. Do you see anything that could be a pollinator in this work of art? If pollinators decrease or disappear because of climate change, what or who else is affected?

How can Nelson's attention to the natural world and use of materials inspire us to make an **assemblage** with clay, found images, and **organic materials**? How can we create art to express care for our environment and concerns about the effects of **climate change**?

MAKE ART

Let's create an assemblage in the form of a container using clay, soil and/or sand, found images, and organic materials (such as leaves, bark, or flower petals) to nurture our relationship with local wildlife.

Materials

- Air-dry clay, play dough, or other clay you can use at home
- Optional: If you don't have clay, ask an adult if you can make salt dough from water, flour, and salt. **This video** shows you how. Salt dough can be baked or air-dried after you shape it. Check with an adult and ask for help before baking it.
- Optional: soil, dirt or sand; this can be mixed with clay to create different textures and color
- Magazines, catalogues, newspapers, or other print media
- Glue or tape
- Scissors
- Organic materials, which might include flower petals, leaves, bark, twigs, shells from nuts eaten at home, wildflowers, or grasses found outside
- Optional: markers or paint (preferably acrylic or tempera paint) to add color and texture to your clay or the surface of your assemblage
- Optional: a journal and a writing implement (pen, pencil), or a sketchbook and drawing tools (crayons, pencil, colored pencils, markers)

Making

1. Start by going outside and observing the natural world. What do you notice? Do you see trees, plants, grass, flowers, or mushrooms? You might want to take notes in a journal or sketch what you see.
2. While you are outside, begin collecting organic materials. These might include leaves, tree bark, twigs, flowers, flower petals, acorns, or bird feathers. Pick up anything that looks safe to touch and inspires or interests you. Only take plant matter that has already fallen to the ground, unless you have permission to pick or take cuttings of flowers and other plant materials.
3. Look through discarded newspapers, magazines, catalogs, and mail for images related to the natural environment. This can include landscapes, gardens, closeups of flowers, fruit or vegetables, animals, parks, farms, or beaches.
4. Cut out images you like and set them aside.
5. Nelson describes her process as making a container to hold her concern and anxiety about climate change and a desire to nurture her relationship with the earth. Start by molding your clay into a physical container, like a cup, bowl, or box. You can also make organic, irregular shapes inspired by the ones in Nelson's sculpture.
6. Once your clay is shaped and before it dries, arrange your cut-outs and organic materials in and around it.
7. If your clay will air dry, you can wait for it to dry and attach images and objects with glue or tape, or you can attach your objects and images first, pushing them into the clay before it dries. If you made salt dough and plan to bake it, bake it first with an adult's help. Then, attach your materials using glue or tape.
8. Optional: add surface color and texture to your assemblage with markers or paint, preferably acrylic or tempera.

Reflection

- Did looking for materials outside to use for art-making help you to see your environment differently?
- What kinds of organic materials were you able to find? Did any materials change over time after you took them inside?
- Do the objects and images you included in your container have a relationship to one another? Do you have a relationship with them? If they are affected by climate change, how might these relationships be affected?
- Show your artwork to a friend or family member. What do they notice? Do they mention the natural world? Ask them what they know about climate change.

Did someone forward this email to you? If you would like to receive these art activities directly, sign up [here](#).



Image: Erin Jane Nelson, *Pollinators Dilemma*, 2021. Installation view: "2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone," New Museum, New York, 2021. Photo: Dario Lasagni

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