

RITUAL ENCOUNTERS

ASHWINI BHAT

FORREST GANDER





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CIRCUMAMBULATION OF MT. TAMALPAIS

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Self Portrait, California Landscape

16 x 10 x 7" | 2022

In *Ritual Encounters*, the Vanderhoef Studio Theatre at Mondavi Centre at U. C. Davis was reconfigured as a kind of a temple celebrating the secular and sacred environment of California’s Mount Tamalpais. Visitors to this installation were invited to circle (in a ritualized walk or circumambulation) spot-lit ceramic monuments and biomorphic sculptures ringed by dirt mandalas in the large, semi-dark exhibition space. Immersed in a looped, meditative video of Mt. Tamalpais, in recorded ecological poetry, and in the clockwise movement of their own bodies among the sculptural way stations, viewers experienced (or recalled) their own link to the non-human world and were given pause to reevaluate the ground they stand upon, both physically and ethically.

This installation was a part of the course “Problem Solving: How to Respond to the World in a Time of Crisis,” taught by Professors Katie Peterson and Meera Heller for the SHAPE (Science, Humanities and Arts: Process and Engagement) Program at UC Davis. SHAPE was introduced with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to facilitate encounters with integrated consortiums of science, engineering and the humanities in order to promote examinations of the ways these linked trajectories might offer informed means for responding to our world and addressing critical issues.

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AMBULATORY CERAMICS AND INDETERMINATE LANDSCAPES

– KAYLEIGH C. PERKOV

It is commonplace to refer to ceramics as a medium firmly rooted in place, and the exhibition *Ritual Encounters*—featuring the work of artist Ashwini Bhat and poet Forrest Gander—is no exception. The ceramic pieces are part of Bhat’s larger “Assembling California” series, which takes its title from the book by journalist John McPhee chronicling the research of geologist Eldridge Moores. The works in the show are rooted in the experiences of Bhat and Gander circumambulating Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, California. Together the two retraced the steps of poets Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Philip Whalen, who in 1965 famously completed their own clockwise hike as ritual meditation, inspiring unknown numbers to follow. Bhat is known as an artist who takes the connection between clay and earth seriously, whether that is in digging her own clay works in Appomattox, Virginia, or her close engagements with ecologists in the fire-disturbed sites of Yosemite and the Sierras. This exhibition is a strong continuation of her approach. *Ritual Encounters* includes thirteen ceramic objects as well as a video projection featuring Mt. Tam and a recitation of the poem “Twice Alive III, Circumambulation of Mt. Tamalpais” by Gander. The exhibition speaks volumes of a close attention to their journey around Mt. Tam. Yet to say the exhibition speaks of place is accurate but insufficient. Instead, it is not just a place, but a season. Not just season, but a year. With *Ritual Encounters* we see a still nascent understanding of place, one that builds on human and non-human relationships and communicates through a formal language of movement.

The physicality of Bhat and Gander’s hike lingers to wonderful effect in the hermetically sealed space of the gallery. A sense of movement comes from the immersive nature of the installation, including a video installation of the chang-

ing landscape along their hike, the meditative rituals performed by Bhat, and the recitation of Gander's poem. Echoing this sense of movement, the ceramics are incredibly gestural. To view a piece in the show such as "Live Oak Tree" (2022) is to participate in a sense memory not fully one's own. The work invites haptic looking: encountering the piece, I could feel the soft give of clay underneath my fingertips. Moreover, the bands of colored thread on the sculpture of "Live Oak Tree"—echoed in the act of Bhat wrapping a thread around a tree branch in the video installation—is continued throughout the show. Many works such as "Circumambulation of Mt. Tamalpais" (2022) and "Self Portrait, California Landscape" (2022) incorporate pieces of fabric, and the combination of the two mediums evokes the sight of cloth fluttering in the breeze. However, *Ritual Encounters* not only communicates past gesture, but it also prompts new ones. The installation begs for the viewer's movement. During my visit to the gallery, I too circumambulated the installation in its entirety, as well as individual pieces, small orbits in a larger constellation.

Such a sense of motion and change is a generative fit for a landscape-based project like *Ritual Encounters*. A part of Bhat's "Assembling California" series, this project is just one in the larger series in understanding California's many and diverse ecosystems. Taken from McPhee's text, the word "assemblage" has acquired a rich and evocative set of meaning to think alongside. In the scientific literature, assemblages refer to the number and abundance of parts that make up a larger whole—such as the minerals that make up a rock or the species that make up an ecosystem. Unlike more culturally loaded terms like "community," the concept of assemblages does not assume specific interactions or intention between the parts; it simply catalogues what is there.¹ As Gander's poem details, the assemblage of Mt. Tam denies the isolated individual; instead, interconnection is a way of life. In one passage Gander describes the honey mushrooms and the trees they grow in:

but in the inseparable
genetic mosaic of their thin
root filaments, the identity
of any singular species blurs among inter-
active populations, twice alive

This passage describes the relational understanding that ecological assemblages require. Populations are understood not solely in isolation but through their connections, quite literal and physical in the sense of the "thin root filaments." Yet, the break in "inter-active" suggests the potential tenuousness of this bond, of coming together and coming apart. They are "twice alive" both alone and through their connections, changing with the landscape. This focus both on interconnection and change is essential. California is used to landscapes continually rocked out of stasis, perhaps most notably in recent years through a string of horrific wildfires. Yet, fire-disturbed landscapes are not the only landscapes that bear the marks of human and animal interaction. The dream of undisturbed nature is slowly falling to the wayside of Western ideas of land management, shaped both by a recognition of global and indigenous relationships to the land that acknowledge human interaction outside of a model of harm. Thinking of the landscape as a changing one in which humans play a role, many scientists and eco-critics have argued, is essential for survival.²



FIRE, WASTE, DEATH, AND LOVE

– VIJAYA NAGARAJAN

We live in a world of rising temperatures and raging fires whose plumes of smoke, reaching the stratosphere, rise from blackened soils, from scorched emptiness, from ghostly landscapes that reconfigure our familiar and intimate experiences of everyday life. We live in a world of rivers trickling away into bone-dry beds here and catastrophically spilling over their banks elsewhere. There are few of us anywhere on earth who would deny that our species has abused the landscapes from which our sustenance, spiritual and practical, derives. One trajectory of ecological, spiritual, and artistic practice in our time aims to recalibrate our relation to the place where we stand, the very ground of our being.

Focused on the theme of honoring California's sacred Mt. Tamalpais, *Ritual Encounters*—a collaboration featuring Ashwini Bhat's exquisite, thought-provoking, biomorphic sculptures and the lucidly articulate poems of Forrest Gander—is timely, evocative, and heart-felt. It promotes a meditative engagement between the exhibition's viewers and the nearby landscape—in this case, Mt. Tamalpais, a legendary mountain domineering San Francisco Bay and the county of Marin.

When you enter the exhibition with its twelve spotlit mandala-like round ceramic sculptures (arranged like the numbers on a clock face), the large, darkened space resembles a garbha-graha, the womb-chamber of a temple. Each sculpture is unique, but forged from a common language: the language of blood, “a vascular language,” as Gander's poem notes. A language of circulation. They all resemble each other as though they shared a distant genetic sequence, human and non-human, echoes of each other. Is that meant to suggest the head of a snake? Or as we look, do those eyes become rounded river stones in a swirl of currents? The sculptures have a tactile



immediacy. Their forms seem to have risen from long meditations. Sometimes, for example, an ochre that is visible beneath a serpentine form disappears when the viewer takes another step, giving rise to a feeling of liveliness. One sculpture, “Opening the Mountain,” which references the Buddhist practice of consecrating a mountain by making a pilgrimage around it, has three columns. All of the columns are hollow and open their mouths to the sky, lingam-like, awakened, vitality pumping through them. They are spotted with red-orange glaze that resembles the bindis often placed on sacred objects— stones, trees, or foreheads. The sculptural forms call out to be recognized as both “other” and as ourselves.

Each one of Ashwini Bhat’s pieces forces us to confront the realities of our present uncanny times head-on; black and brown soils intermingling, the limbs of trees suggesting burnt, fried flesh; and fired earth literalizing a metaphor for our ways of life. Bhat’s evocative, beautiful, haunting pieces hint at bronze-like glaze-washes peeking through her mysterious forms of scattered, intertwined chaos. She brings to the surface our repulsion of what we have done and what we are doing, our incomprehensible unwillingness to stop destroying the world, no matter how fiercely the earth tries to talk back to us in its languages of fire and flood, extreme weather and vanishing species. In doing so, Bhat offers us an experience of the otherworldly rushing headlong into our own small world.

Evoking a walking pilgrimage, a clockwise circumambulation, keeping the potential and actual emptiness of form at the center, to our right as we move, Bhat helps us enact a respectful encounter of the trail, the tree, the animal, the fire; of water, stone, metal; of nameless forms emerging from the chaos of disintegrating form. Waste transformed through death into hand-made, kiln-fired love and adoration.



In the poetry-film that plays on a large screen on one wall of the exhibition, Forrest Gander, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, weaves together a close, sensual reading of the terrain on the mountain, of its trees, birds, and wild creatures—Jeffrey pines, redbud lilacs, manzanitas, scrub jays, laurels, foxes, crows, hawks, Douglas firs, caterpillars, oaks, mosses, and honey mushrooms. His invocation of what it might mean to be “Twice Alive” thunders through the poem, drawing together notions of a “vascular language,” “inciting our recognition,” and questioning the way Western cultures might overvalue rationality. His poem relies on the physical effects of reverberating rhythms to invite us to share deep, personal longings for awe, tenderness, and a loving acknowledgement of the mutuality between animate and inanimate worlds. He pushes us to see more of *what is actually there* on the mountain. In Gander’s poem, *Wasteland for Santa Rosa*, he gives agency to the prophetic voice of the fire itself:



from “Wasteland: for Santa Rosa”

....Below a vast column of
 smoke, heat, flame, and
 wind, I rose, swaying
 and tottering on my
 erratic vortex, extemporizing
 my own extreme weather, sucking up
 acres of scorched
 topsoil and spinning it
 outward in a burning sleet
 of filth and embers that
 catapulted me forward
 with my mouth open
 in every direction at once. So
 I came for you, churning, turning
 the present into purgatory
 because I need to turn
 everything to tragedy before
 I can see it, because
 it must be
 leavened with remorse
 for the feeling to rise.

Watching the film and listening to this poem, I was reminded of both Richard Powers’ ground-breaking novel *The Overstory* in which the voices of trees and

forests become part of the fictional narrative in a believable way, and of Namwali Serpell’s brilliant novel *The Old Drift*, which features a chorus of swarming bees.

This exhibit at the Mondavi Center at UC Davis is a paean to our attentiveness to and intimacy with local geography, a paean that heightens our sense of its vulnerability and our inextricable connection with the non-human. It is also a means of honoring both the historical Native American sacrality of Mt. Tamalpais and the ongoing tradition, initiated in 1965 by poets Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Philip Whalen, of circumambulating the hallowed mountain that overlooks San Francisco Bay.

Mt. Tamalpais is not a distant entity for me; it is the mountain I often visit with my eyes at sunset from Berkeley, a clarity of radiant purple stone and swirling fog. When my mother visits me, she prays to her ocean god, Samudra, facing the Golden Gate Bridge and Mt. Tamalpais. She asks the god to keep the earth and its many living forms safe from harm. Doing a pradakshina, a circumambulation, is the ritual act of keeping the sacred form, relic, object, to the right of your body, as you circle it clockwise— once, thrice, nine times, or even more, depending on the tradition and the pilgrim’s intentionalities and desires. These are performed throughout South Asia as a consequence of vows, or as a means of offering a recognizable gift to a divine form. The Hindu and Buddhist ritual practice of circumambulation can be focused on mountains, rivers, trees, cities, villages, relics, temples, shrines or persons. The pilgrim enacts an expression of the desire to venerate particular places with the consciousness that place is involved in human feeling. A circumambulation can be performed by full body prostrations. Likewise, a devotee may perform a circumambulation by lying down and rolling slowly across the ground around a sacred place, thus inscribing within the larger circumambulation a smaller circular movement, a double circumambulation, so to speak, that might suggest one meaning of “Twice Alive.”

– VIJAYA NAGARAJAN is a scholar and a writer, with a focus on Environment, Hinduism, Ecology, Gender, Ritual, and the Commons. Vijaya is an Associate Professor in the Department of Theology/Religious Studies and in the Program of Environmental Studies at the University of San Francisco. Her book, *Feeding A Thousand Souls: Women, Ritual, and Ecology, An Exploration of the Kolam* (Oxford University Press) pursues the multiple ways in which beauty could embody ethics. She has also been devoted to the environmental movement for several decades in both India and the Bay Area.





Lovers at the Foothills of Mt. Tam

25 x 20 x 20" | 2022

Opening the Mountain
14 x 18.5 x 15" | 2022





Redtrembling Sprigs
23 x 22 x 22" | 2022

Vascular Language
23 x 21 x 18" | 2022





Mt. Tamalpais
25 x 21 x 21" | 2022

Live Oak Tree
23 x 10 x 7" | 2021





Through a Precinct of Greenschists

2 x 18 x 18" | 2022



Buddhist Chant
21 x 10 x 10" | 2022

Moon Up Over Douglas Fir
55 x 20 x 20" | 2022





TWICE ALIVE III,
CIRCUMAMBULATION
OF MT. TAMALPAIS
- FORREST GANDER



maculas of light fallen weightless from
pores in the canopy our senses
part of the **wheeling** life around us and through
an undergrowth stoked with **the unseen**
go the reverberations of our steps

as we hike upward mist holds
the **butterscotch** taste of Jeffrey pine
to the air until we reach a serpentine
barren, **redbud** lilac and open sky, a crust
of frost on low-lying clumps of manzanita

at Redwood Creek, two
tandem runners cross
a wooden bridge over
the stream ahead of us the raspy
check check check of a **scrub jay**

hewing to the Dipsea path while
a plane's slow groan diminishes bayward,
my sweat-wet shirt going cool
around my torso as another runner
goes by, his **cocked** arms held too high

Cardiac Hill's granite boulders appear
freshly sheared Look, you say,
I can see the Farallon Islands there
to the south over those long-backed hills
one behind another a crow **honks**

the moon still up over Douglas
firs on the climb to Rock Spring yellow
jackets and Painted Lady butterflies
settle on the path where some under-
ground trickle moistens the soil

I predict you'll keep to the shade of
the laurels to **nibble** your
three-anchovy-slices-over-cheese
sandwich while I sprawl on a boulder
in full **sun** sucking a pear

the frass of caterpillars tinkles onto beds of dry
leaves under the oak where a hawk **alights**
with its retinue of **raging** crows we are prey to the ache
of not knowing what will be revealed as
the world lunges forward to introduce itself

clusters of tiny green dots, **bitter** oyster,
line the black stick held in your hand, weak
trees leaning into us as if we were part
of the **wet dark** that sustains their roots
under dead leaves and that Armillaria

since honey mushrooms suck from
the soil chemicals that trigger a tree's
defences, they leech the tree's sap
undetected all the while secreting toxins
to stave off competing species

but in the inseparable
genetic **mosaic** of their thin
root filaments the identity
of any singular species blurs among inter-
active populations, **twice** alive

near the summit, a gleaming
slickensides outcrop
sanctifies the path winding
through a precinct of **greenschists**
whose **lethal** minerals sterilize the ground

the hum of some large insect
Immelmanning around
our heads calls to mind,
you tell me, the **low drone**
of a Buddhist chant

but now we really hear chanting
we can't decode —Don't
be so rational—a congregate speech
from the **redtrembling** sprigs, a
vascular language prior to our

breathed language, corporeal, chemical,
drawing our sound into its harmonic, tuning
us to what we've not yet seen, the surround
calling us, theory-less, toward an inference
of horizontal connections there at

ground level, an incantation in-
dependent (of us) but detectable, **consummate**
always resistant (to us) but inciting
our recognition of what it might mean
to be **here**— among others human and not—

here, home, where ours is another of the small
voices taking us over, over ourselves
over into the **nothing-between**, the out
of sight of ourselves, a litany from
spore-bearing mouths as

hyphae stretch their **long** necks
and open their throats opening
a link between systems
a supersaturation of syntax
an **arousal** even as slow-

rolling walls of high-decibel
sonar blow out the **ears** of whales and
fires burn uncontrolled and
slurry pits leak into the creek, etc.
etc., femicides, war, righteous

insistence and still
and **still** the lived sensation fits
into the living sensorium, can't
you hear?—*Don't be so*
rational—the world **inhale**?—hear

the call from elsewhere which
is just where we are, no, even
closer, **inside** us inside the blood-
pulse of our bodies, the bristle of
our mosses, the **embrace—**, and exhale



CREDITS

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