

Small Glimpses Many Times: A Conversation with Nancy Lovendahl

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Joy Armstrong: You have built a decades-long career thinking about the human relationship with the landscape and making work that is the manifestation of nature's teachings to you. I have always viewed your sculptural process as like Isamu Noguchi's, in that your manipulation of natural material is at once essential and invisible. The gestures of your hand within the work are so subtle that the sculptures sometimes seem to have been plucked from the earth fully formed.

Nancy Lovendahl: Yes, I'm more of an earth artist than a landscape artist, I am making a response as a human being connected to nature, by the example of nature. The landscape is more like my mentor, it stuns me with its constant change. It's dangerous, it's safe, it's all the things of human character. It's enduring, but it's also just a pile of rubble. I went to school for ceramics because I wanted to work with nature, I wanted to feel my hands in the dirt. And that was very satisfying but inspired me to start asking, okay, so what is the earth? What is this all about? And who am I? The whole of my career has been attempting to answer those perennial questions with each new series of work fulfilling a purpose but then getting to a security plateau. And so I keep thinking of the earth as a series of new discoveries, new curiosities, new potential realities, and think of what that looks like in visual form. And that's where this whole exhibition of my investigations into scale and human perception came from.

JA: While a viewer can certainly appreciate the great beauty and craftsmanship on the surface, you are also asking for radical introspection by making objects that are about memory and interpersonal connection. What do you hope to accomplish with this new series of work about the mountain?

NL: I've thought about this work for five years, before I even made anything. By choosing to build my own little mountain and investigate two- and three- dimensional iterations, I wanted a concept that, while not apolitical, was a bit less fired up emotionally. My hope is to bring people together to talk about how we can have vastly different take aways after sharing a common experience. The link that I'm pursuing about our country at this moment is the division between citizens while there is so much connecting us—we keep walking away with isolated and different perspectives about what we all share. So the goal is unity. I know it's a leap that I'm asking for people to be very self-reflective, but I believe that if we can collectively identify as the human race, there's a lot of hope for re-connection.

JA: There's something so beautiful about the mountain as a metaphor as we seek a simultaneously micro/macro understanding of all things and ourselves. We can look at the mountain and perceive it as one solid object, just as we can look at a person and reduce and oversimplify who we think they are. A deeper level of understanding is necessary to appreciate that we are all made of a lifetime of experiences and emotions, like the mountain is made of countless rocks and other matter. We have to dive deep in order to grasp the complexity and vastness of it all.

NL: Well, considering the fact that the only two elements that make up life are earth and consciousness, without all the pieces of humanity, we are weak—we need all of it, we need all of each other, we need to stand on each other's shoulders, we need to stand side by side. Each of us contributes just by breath. So that's really what I'm pointing to with this work, is that we think we're seeing the mountain, but we aren't really because we're stuck in our heads. It's very hard and takes a lot of work to stay completely present in this moment. And

so when I made my little mountain, it was inspired by the mountains around me. But instead of looking at it and trying to, you know, carve it exactly like the mountain, what I did is intentionally carved it out of memory. It may not be “real,” but it exists in my imagination, and every human on Earth has their own imagined mountain.

JA: It seems like you are commenting on the universality of the human mind, and how we all have these different experiences and these different perceptions, and yet we are all interconnected by similarities. Through a shared consciousness and cognition, we all intuitively understand many of the same things as everybody else without having to have learned about them. We are all inherently the same.

NL: But that's actually a huge concept that's not experienced by enough people. To open our consciousness and really stay present there takes a tremendous amount of courage. This is where nature is so pivotal for me. There's no sentiment in nature, it is only itself. And so I think the goal of being human is for us to just be ourselves, and to not judge ourselves, to not hate ourselves, to not try to mold ourselves. But to just celebrate this incredible act of creativity in nature, which is: we have consciousness to breathe. We're all just made out of minerals, and vitamins, and dirt.

JA: This new series of work may appear to be a dramatic departure from what you have become so well known for, but that is a purely superficial point of view. The essence of your oeuvre remains deeply engrained in the work, with your relentless investigation into the nature of things. I see your almost obsessive return to the mountain in numerous media, dimensions, and iterations as a natural extension of your attention to the laborious process of stone carving. Has this shift in process and materiality posed a challenge for you, to create a cohesive body of work around a highly abstract concept and challenge the aesthetic identity you've developed over your career?

NL: The greatest challenge is to leave ourselves alone long enough to become all we are. Societal expectations and cultural conditioning are so exhausting, so of course I still go into a default mode of insecurity that I am not enough. I've been meditating over 45 years and I am only like, a half an inch closer to my own consciousness if I let the ego keep running the show. So what I love about having been in this landscape for 40 years, sitting in this studio for 31 years, that I have experienced my most intense learning from observing nature. If you look at nature long enough, you begin to understand that there is no judgement, no apology, just an eternal life cycle. There is no search. I have gained a calm, a willingness to go through that natural process of changing forms, transforming, stretching, depleting, engaging, and expanding. I am still made of all the same stuff, even if it looks completely different in this moment from the outside.

JA: And that really gets to the core of your work about the mountain, I think. You are questioning human perceptions of permanence and truth, commenting on how far we spin out from our own nature.

NL: That, frankly, is what I'm viewing in the United States, ...that people are always translating what's coming over the airwaves and how everybody's got their own ends. But nature doesn't have that. There is no end, it simply is life. The current climate of, “oh, here's a lie, but if I say it often enough, people will believe it's the truth.” So, what is the mechanism within us to check in and find out what the truth really is? If you can get quiet and trust your intuition, the simple truth is that we all have what it takes to rebalance our society and our environment. I'm not saying it doesn't take an enormous amount of courage, but it

gets done if you just put one small step in front of the other. So, this idea came out of my putting one small step in front of myself to try and address the overwhelm.

JA: Being open to different ideas and trying to understand unfamiliar experiences is so hard, because challenging what we *think* we know can be very disconcerting to people. We're so good as human beings at looking for, and rejecting things that don't, confirm what we think we already know. I think what you've done with your mountain concept is to give people an abstract, relatively neutral physical space and place of mind to find respect and empathy for our similarities and differences. Framed by nature, people can feel more freedom to be curious, move away from personal labels and judgment, and embrace the tiny special things that make people who they are.

NL: There's a poet named Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer who lives in the region and wrote, "but it's written in stone,
said the woman
to the sand."

To me, this is about how we are all held together in different forms but that it is all the same sameness. The teacher Ramana Maharshi said "many know the wave becomes the ocean but few know the ocean becomes the wave." For me, that really helps to understand that conceptual mountain, that wall, as we think about our political climate, you know, to break it down and see that it's all just sand. It's all these tiny things and that everything written in stone becomes sand over time.

JA: It makes me think of your work as land art and reminds me of this Robert Smithson piece on the campus of Kent State University called *Partially Buried Woodshed*. It's a memento mori, it's entropy, and an understanding of human mortality that nothing lasts. Not the monuments we build to ourselves or even that mountain on the horizon that seems massively solid and permanent.

NL: Only consciousness remains. There is a monastery just up the road where the monks look at prayer as pure energy, that when they pray for hope and healing in our world, they're putting that energy into the atmosphere. The hope is to tip the scales toward love and peace. We try to deny our own nature and live in our brains, as if our minds can figure everything out, which is an insecure perspective about tapping into our full potential while living a life where we will die. There is an indelible connectedness in this common experience of the life cycle that we all share. I'm not Catholic, but I went to the monastery for about 30 years to sit in meditation with them, because energy is energy. When you really sit in the quiet of your own mind, and you sit within your body, what do you experience? A vibration that is consciousness; there's nothing to attain, there's nothing to accomplish. You're already there. So how, as an artist, can I bring that reality into the museum?

JA: And natural science just keeps teaching us. I'm thinking of those experiments, and I've seen artists work with this also, that demonstrate how water responds to the emissions of different emotions. But no matter how much we anthropomorphize nature, it can't identify whether the energy is bad or good, it just changes. It shows us visually that energy is not destroyed but can transfer and move on to another state.

NL: That cause and effect is called karma in the Buddhist tradition, and I don't know if that is ultimate reality but what I do know is that what is put out is what ricochets back, and that's as evidenced in what I observe in nature. If the snow falls, and it's heavy enough, the tree will

break. Now, is that a bad thing? Is the snow bad? No, the snow is simply what it is. And there's an effect. There is a balanced flow of energy consciousness. If there are so many rocks in the stream of consciousness, consciousness just flows around them. And the rocks dissolve, becoming sand. Like the example in chaos theory of the butterfly that flaps its wings and changes the weather halfway around the world. That's how interconnected the earth is. Now, I think that you can call it consciousness, you can call it creativity, you can call it love, but it shows us that humanity is so much bigger than we know or allow ourselves to experience. I want to keep opening myself up. Let's give ourselves the gift of what's right here, right now in front of us. I think that is where we really learn what being a human really is.

JA: It's so easy to get emotionally bent out of shape by things out of our control, isn't it?

NL: Yes, when it's simply this moment, right now, changing circumstances. Our "pity parties" limit us and make life smaller. I think that we are invited to just keep climbing the mountain, because there is so much on the journey to walk beyond and let go of. Artist Louise Bourgeois was a wonderful inspiration to me, and one of my favorite quotes of hers is something like, "thank God that the art world left me alone for 40 years, so I could do what I wanted." She was around 60 years old when she was discovered and worked until the day of her death at age 94. When I look at my life, the biggest challenge I have is in this studio. So how could I be satisfied being anywhere else? To be an artist, I must connect with pure potentiality. There's no new discovery, there's nothing to invent. There's nothing to celebrate. There's nothing really to make. I mean, I like making objects. But what really motivates me is curiosity and the discovery flowing out of that. I am obsessive compulsive about coming in the studio. Like, showing up and asking "well, what's it going to be today?" Which is terrifying. Then I have to be willing to wait for an answer.

JA: And I'm sure there are many, many days where nothing comes?

NL: Well, I sneak up on it. I come in here and start just cleaning up. That's my favorite thing, to just sweep the floor or something like that. And almost instantly, I'll see something and go, "ah, now I know what to do with that!" And then you gain some momentum and you're off and running.

JA: Like meditation, like life, the studio takes a lot of practice. It takes commitment, dedication, and love. Some people are never lucky enough to find what sustains them.

NL: It is all just small glimpses many times of who and what we are. And unless we get back to what we are, to *evolve* to what we are, we're going to have no environment to live in anymore. We're going to have no love between us, we'll have no trust between us.

I think that we all need to respond to life in our own particular way. And we all do it differently. I'm practicing being courageous enough to show mine. Each of us is needed.