

September 14th - October 20th

# Veils of a Bog

Vanessa Brown

Michelle Helene Mackenzie

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## Veils of a Bog

Through the process of working on this exhibition with Brown and Mackenzie over the last couple months, I've been thinking about the tension of contradictions in a bog, an ecological terrain that is characterized by having a foundation of peat, which is basically a heap of rotting plant matter. The other characteristic of a bog is that their peaty deposits of decay are the fertile ground that spawns life, a landscape that exists in a natural state of equilibrium. Brown and Mackenzie's exhibition embraces these contradictions and ambivalences as they imagine the bog as a meditative and regenerative place using their primary mediums of sculpture and sound.

Here, Brown revisits the form of the mobile, a structure she's worked with several times. Brown's material of choice is steel, a material that seems ill equipped at rendering the soft and damp landscape of a bog. But in a departure from much of her recent sculpture that goes all in on steel as a singular material, the three mobiles that make up *Veils of a Bog* use the sparest of steel rods to make the skeleton of a mobile upon which hang photographs, ribbon, textiles, organic material, and other elements. Where the mosses, grass, reed, and twigs make these

literal and direct representations of elements one might find in this ecosystem, other elements speak to the imagined environment in different ways. Hanging ribbon might be suggestive of an aquatic plant slowly waving in a stream or tufts of usnea dangling from tree branches. Amongst this constellation of objects slowly rotating around on the mobiles are a series of photographs of sculptures, printed on heavy rag paper, mostly depicting gowned women, some embracing infants. The photos are presented cropped and cut up—with the undulating folds of their robes abstracting into waves of hand painted lines on the large format prints. It is significant that these photos were taken at the Bode Museum in Berlin, specifically from their collection of late antique and Byzantine art. While Brown sees these statues of maternal figures as comforting and objects of beauty, she also can't ignore their place within the history of the Byzantine Empire as tools and representations of imperial power.

These sculptures float amidst the multi-channel sound composition *Post Meridiem* by Michelle Helene Mackenzie. Made specifically for Brown's sculptures, Mackenzie's composition consists of two primary elements, that, like the sculptures, sit between literal representation and a more suggestive evocation or abstraction. The first element is a

collage of field recordings of frogs, crickets, birds, and other living creatures of the bog. The second is a low frequency drone positioned across four full range speakers and a subwoofer that rest on the floor around the perimeter of the room. The speakers point towards the walls at an upward tilting angle, the drone reflects off the walls, folding back in on the gallery and enveloping the room in an omnidirectional fog of sound. It's a sound that, even with it's subtle variations and shifting cycles feels like a uniform substance, a dense substrate like the peaty foundation of the bog. The field recordings are installed to play back across four speakers mounted onto the ceiling, the animal sounds cascade down through the thick bog drone that fills the room. Lasting 26 minutes, *Post Meridiem* is broken into three movements, with each having its own cycles and rhythms of sounds and relative levels. Crickets float above the soundwaves only to crest and fall back below, subsumed by the din of a low frequency rumble.

The bog is disorienting. It's lit quite minimally, but even when one's irises adjust to the low light level there is an uncertainty in the space. Brown and Mackenzie repeatedly refer to the bog as a place of ambivalence. There are elements of comfort—the tranquil chirp of the frogs and crickets, the lunar orbs rotating up high like familiar points of light in

a night sky, the soft drape of the ribbons, even the warm glow of the lights and the soft bean bags that one can sink into. Within all this, something else lurks that counters feelings of comfort. Hidden amongst the moss and the draped ribbons are sharp metal fish hooks, not directly threatening, but emanating a sense of danger much larger than their subtle form seems capable of. On first encounter, Mackenzie's composition seem to be on two ends of that spectrum, with the soothing field recordings standing in contrast to the louder ominous tone of the drone. Settling into the space, both sounds embody this ambivalence. As the drone envelops me in the space it feels like a supportive embrace, a protective cloud, and the insistent chirps of the animals suggest an environment where the animals of the bog have taken over and flourished, possibly in the absence of human civilization. That feeling is only further echoed in the photographic reproductions of the sculptures. Floating here in the bog, as fragments, pieces of larger figurative object, one can't help but wonder how these sculptures ended up here, sunk into the muck.

Perhaps this cacophony of animal song is imagining a post apocalyptic world where the bog has swallowed up the physical remnants of human life. All of these bodies and things have now succumbed to decay and

in the cycle and balance of the bog,  
are floating here, decomposing.  
The detritus of empires broken and  
sitting amongst the reeds and the  
grasses, slowly eroding back into the  
ground from which they were built.  
And while these descriptions may  
be painting a portrait of this space  
as the set for an apocalypse, Brown  
and Mackenzie's installation is  
ultimately a place where the spectre  
of death and decay is not a threat,  
but rather a element that sits in a  
delicate equilibrium with the warm  
comforting glow of the bog.

—Pablo de Ocampo



## Artist Biographies

**Vanessa Brown** is an artist who works in sculpture and installation. Her primary medium is steel and she is interested in challenging its historical associations with industry, war, and monument, by focusing its subtler qualities such as pliability, versatility, and slightness. The imagery in her work draws from various sources including landscapes, historical crafts, recurring symbols from her own dreams, feminized labour, gestures of comfort, and ideas of escape.

Vanessa Brown is based in Vancouver on the unceded territories of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh people. Brown graduated with a BFA from Emily Carr University, Vancouver in 2013 and was the recipient of the Chancellor's Award. She has exhibited in Canada, Germany, the USA, and Mexico, notably with solo and two-person exhibitions at The Esker Foundation, Calgary; Erin Stump Projects, Toronto; Wil Aballe Art Projects, Vancouver; and group exhibitions at the Nanaimo Art Gallery; Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin; and King Street Station, Seattle.

**Michelle Helene Mackenzie** is a writer and interdisciplinary artist who works primarily with sound, video and text. She uses modular synthesizers, found sound, field recordings, digital processing,

video, text, and archival research to explore sonic gesture, modes of perception, and acoustic imaginaries. This has culminated in site-specific sound installations, video, sound works, performances, and writing. Mackenzie holds a BA from Simon Fraser University, and spent five years pursuing a PhD in Literature from Duke University, where she studied with Fredric Jameson, Anne Garréta, and others. While there, she researched questions around the violence and cultural amnesia that devours female genius, time and temporality, early twentieth century French literature and film, and the history of sound studies, sonic philosophy, and the sonic arts. Mackenzie's works have been performed and exhibited in San Francisco at Kadist Gallery, in Brooklyn at The Hand, in Calgary at Esker Foundation and in Vancouver at Western Front, 221A, VIVO, Sunset Terrace, The Fishbowl and Polygon Gallery. Her work has also been released in conjunction with writing via The Operating System (Brooklyn), The Cultch's Soft Cedar and The Capilano Review's Small Caps (Vancouver).

## List of Works

### *Veils of a Bog*, 2018

Steel, Inkjet prints, gouache, charcoal,  
oil paint, netting, nylon, ribbon, MDF,  
vellum, ultracal, dried flowers, dried  
bullrush, dried grass, branches, moss,  
shrimp hooks, beads, paper clip, shell.

### *Post Meridiem*, 2018

Michelle Helene Mackenzie  
Multi-channel sound composition

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