Desert Pool {If every desert was once a sea}

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KAREN MIRANDA ABEL

Desert Pool

{If Every Desert Was Once a Sea}
Situated in the driest region of Europe within southern Spain’s Almería province, the Sierra de María-Los Vélez Natural Park lies in a massive alpine mountain system known as the Cordillera Subbética. Approximately seven to eight million years ago during the late Miocene period, an ancient sea covered the Cordillera almost completely, except for a few areas that became islands (Sanz de Galdeanoa and Alfaro 176). Today, an abundant record of marine deposits rests in the low-lying Neogene sedimentary basins of the region. Encountering only a few of these fossils in situ left me with a lasting sense of intrigue and deep artistic affinity for this place during a stay in the national park as artist-in-residence at Joya: arte + ecología in 2016.

This scenic 22,670-hectare nature reserve lies northeast of the Tabernas Desert, a stark geological landscape of wild badlands made famous as the filming location of classic Western films. Characterized by moon-like plains and rocky summits, here, nestled in the rain shadow of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, Donna and Simon Beckmann and their two teenage children, Sesamé and Solomon, have realized Joya: arte + ecología, an arts-led research centre and artist residency. Exquisitely restored from an abandoned farmhouse complex with holistic vision and resolute attention to detail, Joya: arte + ecología thrives in a challenging yet compelling desert microclimate. Over more than a decade, the Beckmann family has evolved the project into a site-responsive residence that demonstrates a finely tuned spatial aesthetic with inspiring sensitivity towards the native ecology and cultural history of the site. Their emerging creation is a warmly minimalist off-grid home that sustainably functions as a habitable work of contemporary sculpture in natural congruence with the enveloping landscape.
and climatic conditions. Sun and wind provide electricity throughout the house, rainwater is collected from the roof, and waste is recycled through a grey-water system. During my time as artist-in-residence, I came to understand Joya: arte + ecología as a living artwork, a monumental life’s work created and nurtured daily by the Beckmann family. True to its name, Joya—Spanish for “jewel”—radiates a tremendous sense of integrity and legacy, like a gemstone gradually revealed in the landscape by the wind and rain.
Minimalist spaces and traditional architecture at Joya: arte + ecología
Imbued with the tonal light changes of autumn, my October residency took the form of a fieldwork practice, which culminated in the site-specific installation *Desert Pool (If every desert was once a sea)*. The project references the primeval sea that would have occupied the area millions of years prior to the current desert ecology, due to its proximity to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the basins of the Cordillera Subbética. Even the region’s mountains and ridges may have once rested beneath prehistoric waters as part of sedimentary deposits on a primitive sea floor. Evidence of this ancient water body is readily exhibited across the desert landscape in an abundance of fossilized marine life specimens preserved in the terrain’s eroding sedimentary layers.
Following *Vernal Pool* (2014) and *Riffle Pool Riffle* (2014), *Desert Pool {If every desert was once a sea}* is the third in a series of elemental works that reflect on water bodies as liminal spaces. Far from a stagnant form, a pool is a dynamic landscape that has retained its mystery. In each “pool” I see a mythic potential, a kind of portal channeling visionary histories across millennia at the threshold of a timeless sense of equilibrium. Through this thematic concept of a “reflecting pool,” immersive, site-sensitive understandings of place and geologic time are sought.

*Desert Pool {If every desert was once a sea}* is a light-reflective installation created in the gallery and primary artist studio at Joya: arte + ecología. The minimalist light-filled space features a wall-sized picture window with a magnificent view of the fields framed by the Aleppo pine-forested mountains of the Sierra Larga. Informed by the topography, geology, and ecology of the area, this work was executed with particular observation of the light that travels through the large architectural opening with each sunrise. The reflective aqueous surface of the wall-to-wall installation represents a kind of material recollection of the ancient long-vanished sea. Further referencing specific formative events such as the Zanclean flood—an epic breach of the Strait of Gibraltar theorized to have refilled the dry Mediterranean basin five million years ago—*Desert Pool’s* symbolic waters signal a consolidation or reckoning with the prehistoric origins of the area.

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1 Featured in *The Goose Vol.13, Issue 2, Article 2*. Visit the *Vernal Pool* project website for more information.

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*Desert Pool {If every desert was once a sea}, 2016, Karen Miranda Abel*
I invested the first half of the artist residency in daily field excursions to expose the metal material selected for the installation to the desert landscape. Metal foil was chosen for its rugged yet malleable elemental properties, with the golden colour of the pure brass radiating the auric quality of the desert light. The shifting autumn atmosphere consisted of cool, still mornings and hot afternoons when the wind whipped across the fields, activating the wind turbine that provides electricity for the house, which was often the only sound heard upon commencing my solo hike each day. Three 92-metre (100-foot) lengths of raw brass foil were carried across the landscape from the Joya residence and repeatedly dragged down the *barranco* (Spanish term for a dry, ravine-like fluvial channel) as a method of tempering and etching the metal with the terrestrial textures of the rainwater pathways.
The barrancos of the alpine desert are deep erosional gullies in the soft mountain foothills carved by rare rainstorms. A gradual sculpting process, the barrancos were likely formed over hundreds or thousands of years by sudden floods which have historically occurred once every few years or more. A recent increase in these rain events over the last decade is thought to be an effect of climate change. The flooding rain scours the limestone, red sandstone, and domes of white clay of the mountainous slopes with a barrage of rushing water, creating deep fluvial passages that remain bone dry for much of the year during which the wind further erodes the landscape.

The barranco unravels south for many kilometres, eventually widening into an expansive *rambla* (large riverbed) where it ultimately releases into the Mediterranean Sea. Each day I followed the meandering path that rainwater has possibly travelled for millennia, traversing down the secluded and narrow barranco passage beneath steep bluffs of parched limestone. As imagined, the act of dragging the lengths of metal foil down the barranco resonated a sound remarkably like rain. I led the metallic serpentine streams over giant boulders, around limestone outcrops, and across shale and sandstone deposits, recording and delineating the composition of the barranco onto its surface while transmitting the rare sound of rainfall echoing across the desert hills.
Desert sunlight reflections in the barranco

Fieldwork processes in the barranco
The three metal sculptures were left in situ for several days to acquire a natural patina. Each day I descended into the barranco to discover the ribbons of metal resting in curiously new postures due to the previous evening’s spirited winds, which would festively lift and twist the lengths of foil. Under the heat of the intense sun, combined with morning condensation and direct contact with the minerals present in the ground, the metal surface developed oxidized marks and marbled stains contributed by the surrounding plants. A rare light rainfall seasoned the metal surface with a raindrop pattern. Aleppo pine needles deposited by the wind were similarly recorded on the material with tarnished markings.

While waiting for the process of natural patination to occur, I created some ephemeral works in the barranco by temporarily gilding rock surfaces with gold leaf. Evidence of fossilized marine life is increasingly exposed in the barranco as the elements excavate the sedimentary layers of the ancient sea floor. A deep limestone impression of a large fossilized ammonite—a prehistoric extinct mollusc—measuring more than 30 centimetres (12 inches) across was the most extraordinary specimen, located about 40 minutes deep into the barranco. The fossil itself likely washed away long ago. Small torn pieces of gold leaf were placed on the stone surface by hand, only loosely secured with the natural mountain spring water that feeds into the local village of Vélez-Blanco. Over a few days, the delicate gold leaf fragments were carried away by the wind, a process intended to reference the present-day impermanence of the sedimentary marine record. The water and wind that revealed the ancient ammonite imprint will also wash it away and, in time, deposit its remnants back into the sea.
Once dragged out of the barranco, back up to the residence and into the gallery space, the metal foil pieces were cut and assembled as parallel latitudes across the floor, like a large topographic relief map. Sunlight from the window illuminated and animated the installation, travelling across the room and reflecting light around the space. The light created a sensation of waves on the luminous, undulating surface, evoking imagery of a warm sea laid before the arid landscape framed in the window. Visible in the foreground of the large window is Joya’s water tank, a six-metre-deep rainwater harvesting *aljibe*, which must be replenished with trucked-in water during the long periods of drought.

Like a ribbon of time, the thin brass foil symbolizes an era when the land was inhabited by an ancient sea and its highest mountain peaks may have been islands—a period that spanned a mere sliver relative to the geologic timescale of Earth. Framing the work in this way, the mythic *Desert Pool* floods the interior space like a mirage in momentary symbiosis with the present. The visitor’s eye sails across the artifact’s faceted surface of gentle, illuminated waves and lands at the water cistern set deep in the ground before navigating over the chalky hay fields and lastly rising up to the Sierra Larga. Resting one’s gaze high along this mountain ridge crested by a rocky outcrop named Peña Casanova, the visitor is reminded that—if not completely submerged by the primeval waters of long ago—the summit of this commanding landform may have stood long enough to witness a time when the *desert was once a sea.*
KAREN MIRANDA ABEL is a Canadian interdisciplinary artist based in Toronto. Concerned with ephemera and slow art processes, Abel’s field studies and site-sensitive elemental installations approach art as environment and process rather than object or commodity. The interplay of light and spatial relationships are tools and collaborators in Abel’s research-intensive practice, and she ultimately views her works as conceptual gardens cultivated in time and place. Abel’s works include ecological projects and public art gardens produced with the Ontario Science Centre and Walpole Island First Nation in Canada. In 2014, she was the recipient of the Jury’s Choice Award and the Ontario Association of Landscape Architects/GROUND Award for Vernal Pool, a participatory project about water, place, and precipitation. She has produced and exhibited internationally in Australia, Spain, and the US. Her website is karenmirandaabel.com.

Joya: arte + ecología is a non-profit arts-led field research centre in rural Andalucía, Spain. Our research is manifested through a residency programme for artists and writers, as well as cross-disciplinary collaborations with ecologists and environmental activists. Our own rigorous initiative is to live off-grid and foster deep understanding of the alpine desert, whose transformation serves as an epithet to effects of climate change worldwide. We are developing a transferable and combined strategy of research-driven innovation, restoration, and conservation of land. We utilise contemporary art and thinking as a means to express, interpret, and disseminate the ideas we are generating. Contemporary art expresses the nuance attributed to a deep understanding of a sense of place, and it provides the insight into nature that the majority of us find convenient to ignore. Learn more at joyaarteyecologia.org.

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Works Cited
