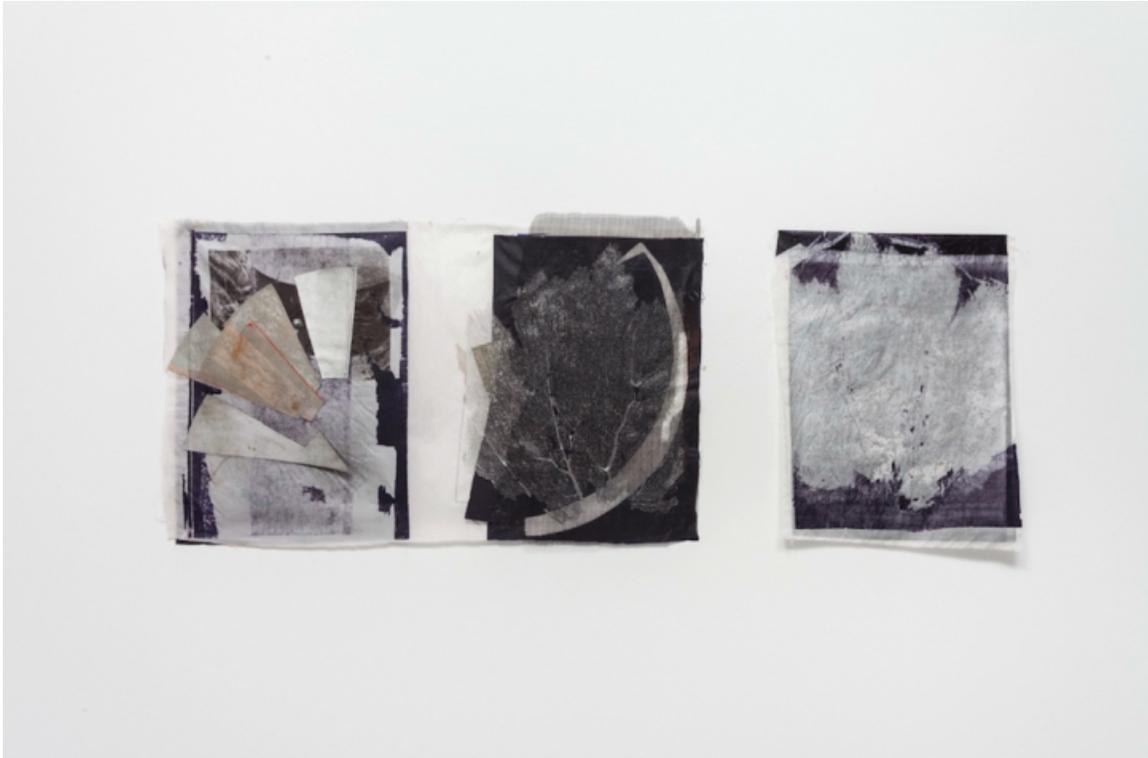


# HYPERALLERGIC

## Kate Levant's Chicago Witches

Formally, Kate Levant's work has become more rigorous and complex since *Blood Drive*, and the art-activism of that show has given way to encoded references touching on sociopolitical issues.

By Natalie Haddad, October 29, 2016



Kate Levant, "Witches Playing the Fans" (2016), rubber-based ink monoprint, gorgonia ventalina octocoral, synthetic window screening, canvas and thread on nylon spinnaker sail, 20 x 50 1/2 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago)

CHICAGO — With concurrent shows in Chicago and Detroit, Brooklyn-based artist Kate Levant creates a dialogue between two bodies of work that extends beyond the gallery and across geographical lines. Systems — of exchange, growth, and decay — and the relationships between them are recurring themes in Levant's work, which includes mixed-media collages and assemblages, as well as collaborations and curatorial work with other artists.

In 2009, while still a graduate student at Yale, she organized *Blood Drive* at Zach Feuer, a conceptual group show whose overlapping themes included the body and the circulatory system, the participating artists' creative processes, and the workings of the New York Blood Center. The exhibition culminated in an actual blood drive at the gallery.

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Formally, Levant's work has become more rigorous and complex since *Blood Drive*, and the art-activism of that show has given way to encoded references touching on sociopolitical issues. But her preoccupation with the systems that sustain life and society, and the consequences of their breakdown, remain at the heart of her practice. Her approach, transforming salvaged and industrial materials into subtle but suggestive abstractions, informs her current shows, *...Which's Ploying the Fans* at moniquemeloche in Chicago and *Valerian Dials for Trembling Hands* at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery in Detroit (to be reviewed next weekend).

*...Which's Ploying the Fans* (all works 2016) is comprised of diaphanous collages, primarily in neutral tones (a vibrant sea foam green piece stands out), all unframed, along with a handful of sculptures, including two embellished broomsticks resting against the wall.

The gallery's website explains the title as "a reassembly of the phrase 'witches foiling the plans,' referencing the traditional narrative that depicts witches as agents of chaos." The chaos alludes to nature and natural disasters, prompted by climate change: "[T]he wreckage left behind by a hurricane or flood, and the push and pull struggle between Mother Nature and man." Levant addresses the themes with her materials, such as nylon spinnaker sail, aluminum foil, and construction materials like polyurethane, hemp rope, and electrical tape.



Installation view of "*...Which's Ploying the Fans*" (2016), Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago

Organic elements (coral in particular) symbolize man's impact on nature and cultivate a sense of detritus washed ashore. "[a ~ploy~] Broomstick's Periostacic Transitional Device\_lead\_Verdant Ventalina'd Ventilator" is a panel of nylon spinnaker sail pinned to the wall and divided into uneven color blocks of black, silver, and sea foam green, with a fan made of pink gorgonia ventalina coral and chopsticks attached

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and a silver broomstick leaning against the wall. For “Witches Ploying the Fans,” a smaller work near the gallery’s entrance, two pieces of spinnaker sail are divided into three rectangular block prints, with window screening and silver coral — manmade and organic patterning — overlapping in the central print. In both pieces, Levant quietly evokes the floods and tsunamis that have devastated the Pacific Rim in recent years.

Although her materials (gathered from the Caribbean, New York, and Maine) signify natural disasters, the show’s title and references to witchcraft indicate a hand behind the chaos; and the combination of such natural elements as coral with manmade and industrial materials suggests a connection between global warming and global capitalism, in which ecological systems are devastated by the hand of man. Levant literalizes the maleficent hand with the juxtaposition of two other works, “Cane’ic loop’Evasive Dominance” and “[a ~ploy~] Broomstick’s Bamboo’d’Stick.” The former, a large (92 by 42-inch) collage of aluminum foil, sketchbook paper, and drafting paper on nylon spinnaker sail, scrolls down the wall to the floor, with a broom/hand-shaped cutout hanging down the right side; the latter is a broomstick leaning against the wall, with hemp rope hanging from the top and tape wrapped around the bottom.

Here, the artworks reflect each other, with the broom/hand/wand triad conjuring a mystical hand at work. But, like much of the art, the pieces feel like artifacts more than agents in an act of destruction or creation. The handmade aesthetic of the pieces precludes any direct link with global capitalism (the broomstick is much more a repurposed fragment than a Home Depot purchase), and their function is ambiguous — it’s not clear if the hand/broom, for instance, is singled out as a perpetrator or victim of the chaos. While the hemp rope attached to the broomstick in “[a ~ploy~] Broomstick’s Bamboo’d’Stick” has a quasi-mystical quality (another gallery-goer asked if it was a Native American-style “spirit stick”), the hand/broom paper cutout in “Cane’ic loop’Evasive Dominance” hangs limply from the spinnaker sail sheet, like a delicate skin, severed from a body and subject to fate.

The ambiguity contributes to the sense of intersecting and interweaving systems (“the push and pull struggle between Mother Nature and man”) that relates Levant’s works to one another and the surrounding world. The sociopolitical struggle between Mother Nature and man is complicated by the gender implications of the exhibition’s title and witch references. Levant avoids superficial tropes of “feminine” art, based on the abject (formless or fluid) woman, with sculptural collages and collaged sculptures that push to the absolute limits of deconstruction without losing their structure. It’s because her works are confidently constructed that pieces like “Cane’ic loop’Evasive Dominance” and “Ocular Mobile,” a small wall-mounted assemblage incorporating a broken lock and a shoe buckle, can seem fragmented — or in the process of fragmentation, like an organism in the continuous process of growth and decay. (The works in Levant’s Detroit show push this even further.)

In this way, the artwork invokes a tradition of women artists, notably Eva Hesse, whose art uses formalist principles to play against the formalism of male counterparts. It’s particularly evident in two pendant pieces, “Nacre’ous Composite Vivisection” and “Nacre’ous Oocellum.” Both large, rectangular planes of aluminum foil with circles cut out near the center, the pieces literalize what Michael Fried famously called the “theatricality” of Minimalism by actually reflecting light back onto the viewer (also reiterating the theme of water). Yet where Minimalist icons by the likes of Richard Serra or Tony Smith stare down the viewer with their size, weight, and precision, “Nacre’ous Composite Vivisection” is anti-monumental, hung low to the ground (the bottom edge flush with the floor); the circle is off-center and a smaller sheet of paper sits on the top edge like a chimney. And the aluminum foil sheet that constitutes “Nacre’ous Oocellum” curls up from the wall on one edge and butts up to a window on the other edge.

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Kate Levant, "Nacre'ous Composite Vivisection" (2016), aluminum foil, aerosol adhesive, drafting paper, silicone discs, plastic laminate, rubber-based ink monoprint, oil based polyurethane, nylon spinnaker sail, and aerosol enamel on paper, 70 x 77 inches.

With these pieces and throughout ...*Which's Ploying the Fans*, the artist exploits the feminine gendering that accompanies details like unconventional and low installation, lightness (in color and weight), and apparent imprecision to take on the systems of exchange between the spectator and the art. Charged with meaning and mysticism, Levant's complex, textured abstractions foil the conventions of both abstract and socially engaged art.

... *Which's Ploying the Fans* continues at *Monique Meloche Gallery* (2154 West Division Street, Chicago, Illinois) through today.