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ArtSeen

Aneta Bartos: *Monotropa Terrain*

By [Alex A. Jones](#)



Aneta Bartos, *Monotropa Terrain*, 2021. Super 8 transferred to digital, 12:51 minutes. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

Eros and sexuality are not the same thing. Sexuality is a social order, like gender—a behavioral code to which we conform or transgress. Eros is something more universal. It is the animating desire of nature; the spark that connects bodies. Eros is phallic sea vents on the deep ocean floor, endlessly spewing heat and alkaline fluids which may have spawned life itself. Eros is the floating caress of a honeybee on the genitalia of a flowering plant. It is the thrill of the sun's heat on skin that is unaccustomed to being naked. It is the special mucous that covers a clownfish, making it slippery and immune to the venomous sting of anemone tentacles.

In an erotic view of nature, the body is a psychedelic concept. That is to say, it's a matter of altered perception. "The body" can swell to replace the scientific and colonial terms that typically delineate nature: an ecosystem is a body; the land is a body. It is the mutability of the body—and the eros of its constant becoming and unbecoming—that Aneta Bartos touches with her video-based exhibition *Monotropa Terrain*.

The eponymous film (2021) is a sensuous Super 8 montage that depicts a group of pale, womanoid creatures who lurk in a forest and float in an overgrown pond. The naked women stroke and wrestle one another in the mud and moss, pressing together soft parts and entangling limbs. The imagery recalls Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* (1973–78), an iconic series of performances that documented the artist's body merging with the Earth. In contrast to the ritual minimalism of the *Siluetas*, however, Bartos's film is charged by the erotic interaction of multiple bodies. But here "erotic" begs a definition, for the impact of the film is not reductively sexual. These women are feral and uncanny. They grasp one another like newborn animals, freshly spawned, trying to merge back into one. We watch them habituate to their environment and each other with a messy intimacy suggesting the eros of birth as much as sex. Two nested bodies may suggest coupling, but three or four begin to resemble sea creatures or extraterrestrial life forms. In the end of the film, human form disintegrates completely, blooming out of focus into film grain patterns that evoke clouds of spores.



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The film is exquisite, but the exhibition's trick turns on a series of shorter videos, *Testimonies I-V* (2021) installed in curtained cubicles, like confession booths. In each booth, a different woman delivers a monologue before a concrete wall. "It wasn't until after Chernobyl that my hair started falling out," says one woman, who then recounts an unusual erotic fascination she developed with a sprouting potato plant. The most striking account is by a woman (played by Bartos) who believes she is infected by a bug that crawls up her bathtub drain. She thinks the bug is responsible for her recent strange behaviors, which include orgasmic convulsions and sleepwalking naked into the forest. She tries to get rid of the bug with copious amounts of Drano, only to realize there is no bug at all—it's her own body driving these strange urges, which are attempts "to shake something loose that's been clogging me up."

The *Testimonies* supply a context of chemical pollution and ecological collapse that gives potency to the work. We are aware that the earth is being poisoned, but who yet grasps that it is one's own body dying? That the Drano goes down our own throats? Sometimes the body knows a thing before the mind, and the flesh may revolt against the sickness and grief of our dying planet before we can conceptualize it. Logical thinking is inadequate to fathom the collapse of the biosphere, anyway—it must happen under the skin.

But the dominant social order revolves around mechanistic notions of the body, as well as humanist (colonial) conceptions of the "individual." Individuality is a hierarchical framework, always implying that some individuals are worth more than others. Deviations from this fixed conception of self are historically written off as mental illness or primitivism, while embodied forms of knowledge are pathologized as hysterias and perversions.



Aneta Bartos, *Monotropa Terrain (Testimonies I-V)*, 2021. Digital film, 33:33 minutes. Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery.

Bartos's project, dancing between poles of intimacy and alienation, touches powerfully on ecological notions of selfhood. In the face of environmental trauma, the breakdown of conditioned notions of identity and the body might resemble illness or erotic dysmorphias. But the recognition that we are part of something bigger, something *alive*, is not a form of psychosis: it's the cosmic horror inherent in ecological awakening. When we open the possibilities of the body—as the ghostly women in *Monotropa Terrain* so freely open their legs—we are apt to rub uncomfortably along the fault-lines of binary thinking, slipping into relational and intersectional territories. *What is me/not me? What is inside/outside?* Ecological awakening hinges on the realization that we are not autonomous beings, but bodies within bodies, desiring to become. Eros (“the bug”) is a creature that sleeps inside us, holding dominion over a terrain that the social order has deemed the underworld.

It is to the underworld that Bartos leads us. The exhibition title refers to the ghost pipe, genus *Monotropa*. The colorless skin of the women in the film mimics the appearance of this forest wildflower, unique among plants because it lacks chlorophyll and does not photosynthesize. It is often called a parasite, because it takes its nutrients from a subterranean mycorrhizal network, a

fungus structure which also connects the roots of the surrounding trees. But why assume that the ghost pipe gives nothing back to the network—who knows what these organisms share with one another across their mycelial nervous system? It is folly to assume that anybody is autonomous. Unlike other flowers that turn their faces toward the sun, the translucent bell of *Monotropa* points down, into the ground. A fitting emblem for Bartos, the ghost pipe's body directs us toward a hidden consciousness.

Contributor

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