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Features

Bit Torrent: The Work of Cynthia Hooper

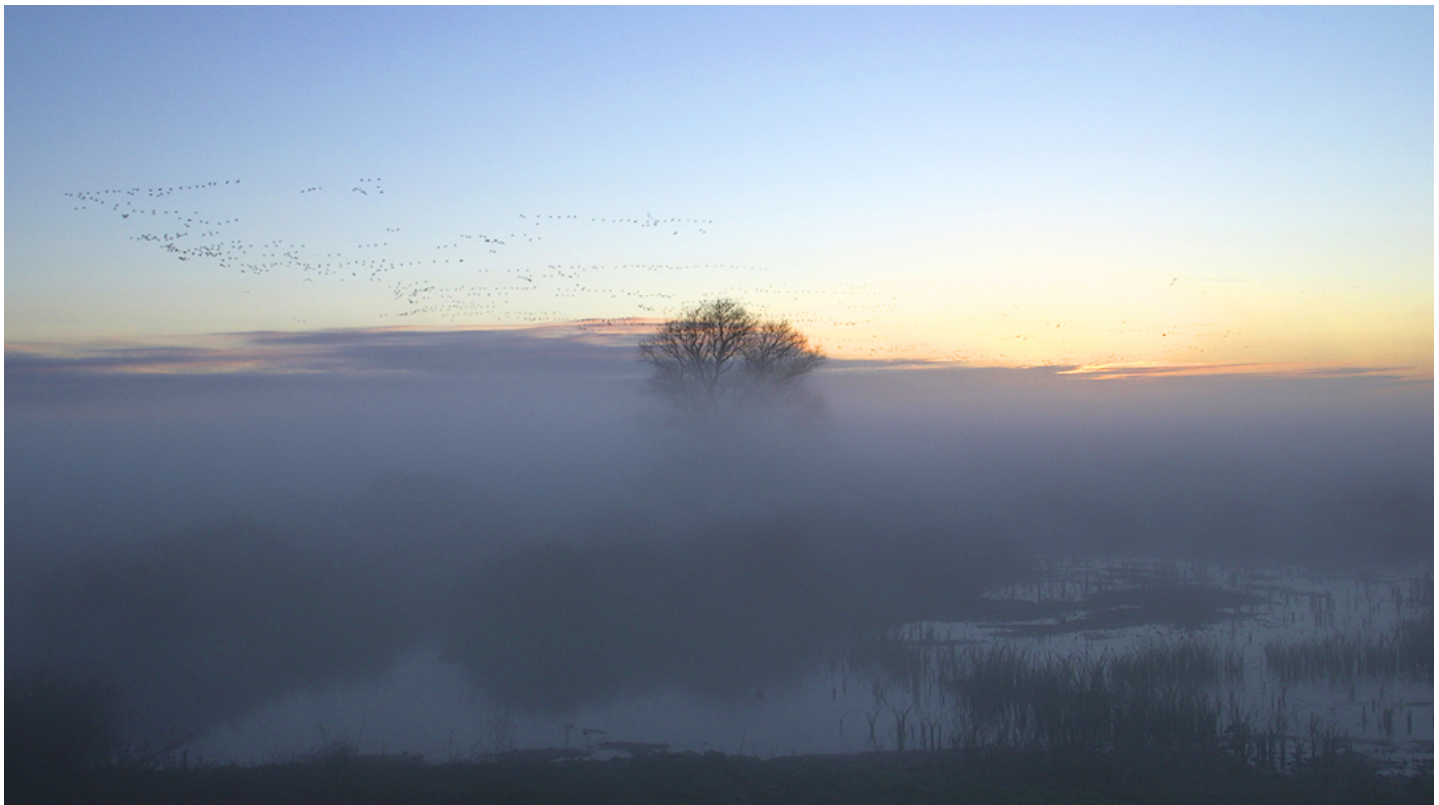
By Gabrielle Gopinath February 27, 2018

In-depth, critical perspectives exploring art and visual culture on the West Coast.

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Cynthia Hooper's work teems with information. Her current show, *Cultivated Ecologies* at Humboldt State University Third Street Gallery, is part art, part educational initiative, and part environmental broadsheet. In it, she uses videos, maps, and graphics to chart the epically scaled works of 20th-century engineering that reconfigured California's waterways, and upended the state's ecological balance in the process.

Most Californians have never laid eyes on this infrastructure. Many, perhaps, have never considered it, even though life as we know it is sustained by millions of gallons of water pumping through its channels. *Cultivated Ecologies* sets out to close this gap in our knowledge, using text, topographic images, and landscape views to depict a series of state and federal wildlife refuges that form part of that system. These refuges are part-time, inadvertent wetlands, created by the mass seasonal diversion of water from the Sacramento River and other waterways to California's Central Valley for agricultural purposes. Hooper created detailed maps using data from the United States Geological Survey to represent the network of pipes, culverts, and canals used to divert millions of gallons of water into a series of spillways each year. The timeshare wetlands that result appear as blue squiggles in a sea of brown. The videos playing alongside the maps depict the same wetlands at ground level, in real time.



Cynthia Hooper. *Merced National Wildlife Refuge (San Joaquin Basin)*, 2017 (video still); single-channel color video with sound; 08:30. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Cynthia Hooper.

Hooper told me that, growing up in post-industrial Ohio, she remembers the Cleveland River catching fire in 1969 and seeing pictures of the aftermath in the newspaper, with "a hundred thousand dead fish floating on the water."¹ She moved to California in the early 1980s to study at the University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco Art Institute. In graduate school she started to survey the Western landscape, first using painting and later video. Her practice was grounded in the example of urban conceptualists like Hans Haacke, Allan Sekula, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles—artists who, in the 1970s, began using words with images to depict kinds of work that remained invisible: women's domestic labor, garbage pickup, and the movement of goods in container ships around the globe. Like them, Hooper depicts the world in terms of systems that interlace in time, using text, video, and topography to bring normally hidden systems and processes to light.

Like the artist's 2015 exhibition *A Negotiable Utopia*, which dealt with northern California's Humboldt Bay, and her 2012 photo essay, "*Humedales Artificiales: Three Transitional Wetlands*," the installation in *Cultivated Ecologies* pairs absorbing images with maps and didactic text. Viewers ricochet between modes, from the immersive experience of watching real-time footage of pastoral landscapes, to the bird's-eye overview associated with data acquisition. Viewing the exhibition feels like multitasking, and yet it's clear why the artist has adopted this two-pronged approach. Each medium reveals an aspect of the subject hidden from the other's purview. The exhibition's six videos, deep in illusionistic space and rich in detail regarding the moment-to-moment existence of the wetlands they document, fail to indicate the system of water diversion and management to which those sites belong. Topographic views reduce the same places to a sequence of GPS-aided, precision-drawn contours, revealing the exact extent of their interconnectedness while obscuring much else. Viewers need both.

The videos depict a series of pleasant, non-overwhelming landscape views of fields and wetlands. Shots are often oriented around a central motif, like an isolated tree or a duck blind. Clips shot from the same sites at regular intervals register seasonal change. They document the consistent presence of wild animals and migratory birds, as well as the intermittent presence of the relatively few human beings who enter these remote preserves: birdwatchers, sport hunters, subsistence hunters, fishermen. The maps and videos provide insight into the social function of these marginal spaces, documenting the range of uncommon opportunities they afford individuals who cross paths across boundaries of class, race, and politics.

In the videos, sustained shots in deep focus succeed one another at a slow pace. But seasonal change does not proceed in the leisurely manner one expects to find in nature. Dissolves transition from one season to the next. Fields give way to wetlands biennially, as a spillway gate near Sacramento opens and closes. A field of dry stubble suddenly fills with water, like a bathtub; later, it will be as abruptly drained. There is no action, other than what happens by accident. Sound is diegetic (breeze in the reeds, birdcalls). Tiny, discrete movements animate every part of the screen at all times, making it coruscate. The video image is rendered dynamic in this way, as a yoga pose gets animated by breath or a musical note by vibrato.



Cynthia Hooper. *Kern National Wildlife Refuge (Tulare Basin)*, 2018 (video still); single-channel color video with sound; 08:00. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Cynthia Hooper.

In winter, when the wetlands flood, migratory species fill the screen. Cranes, grebes, and sanderlings darken the sky with their numbers, filling the gallery with the rustle of wings and the sound of their keening cries. In summer, when the same open place has been drained and converted to field, groundhogs hold down the turf. If you watch long enough, a coyote trots through the frame. The refuge looks natural enough when viewed from any singular point. It's only when the place is perceived across the passage of seasons, from multiple vantage points, that its profound artificiality comes into view.

In his 2015 book *After Nature*, law professor and environmental historian Jedediah Purdy makes the case that there is no nature left in the Anthropocene, the emergent geologic era in which human influence has altered every aspect of the natural world.² Hooper's work seems to be in dialogue with this notion. Certainly, it challenges us to consider whether the category "nature" still holds much relevance in the environment's now unnatural state. The few remaining, intensely managed fragments of the Central Valley's once limitless wetlands are many things, none of which have much to do with nature as we understand it.

Cultivated Ecologies makes the compelling case that these wetlands merit our attention and our preservationist energies anyway. The fact that old-growth forests and wetlands are sparse makes the preservation of the splintered archipelago of constructed wetlands and reclaimed second-, third-, or fourth-growth forests a matter of more urgency. Hooper's texts and videos document the artificiality of these spaces as they currently are, without drenching the experience with nostalgia for the way they used to be. The work is relentlessly informative, didactic in the way a good encyclopedia is didactic, and fact-based in a way that United States environmental policy is notably not, at present. The work asks you to read, and succeeds on one level in making that demand seem contemporary. The particular kind of distracted, code-switching reading experience that the

exhibition as a whole engenders is recognizably of the moment; in terms of the relationship between text and pictures, it is as though the exhibition has been extrapolated into three dimensions from a website.



Cynthia Hooper. *Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area (Sutter/Yolo Basins)*, 2018 (video still); single-channel color video with sound; 07:30. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Cynthia Hooper.

Each of the spillways and tributaries Hooper maps has associated seasonal wetlands. Each comes with a long and thorny relationship to the notoriously complex subject of California water rights and a nearly century-long history of being managed by public and private interests to yield profit. Hooper's systemic investigation goes down all those avenues, and more. Her maps and texts brandish facts. They do not generalize. Standing at the center of the gallery space and being surrounded by window-shaped panels of intricately massed information felt like the way one imagines being inside a computer. It was a lot to upload. The phrase "bittorrent," used to label a computing protocol for large files, came to mind.

Visually speaking, the water diversion and wetlands-management systems described here are complex enough to defeat the imagination's initial, reflexive response. Information at this level of density makes its own aesthetic weather, and here it generates a voluptuous impression of complexity that qualifies this exhibition as an environmentally themed subset of West Coast noir. This unlooked-for payoff enhances and complicates the experience of the exhibition, even as it cuts across the work's expository grain.

Cynthia Hooper: *Cultivated Ecologies* is on view at *Humboldt State University Third Street Gallery in Eureka, CA* through *March 4, 2018*.

Notes

1. This, and all subsequent statements from the artist, are from a conversation with the author on Thursday, December 21, 2017.
2. Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

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