

VIRGINIA L. MONTGOMERY (VLM)

EYE MOON COCOON



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

OCTOBER 7 - NOVEMBER 30, 2023

AUSTIN, TEXAS

THE MOTH EFFECT

“The butterfly effect” is a term that describes a condition of sensitive interdependence. Originating in meteorology, it explains how tiny changes can ripple through a complex system to produce wide-reaching effects. This power of the small gesture is both a warning and a beacon of hope: the flapping of an insect wing in a miniature movie set, for example, can funnel energy into a destructive storm as much as it can produce a groundswell of panspecies empathy, reinforcing our awareness of the fundamental interconnectedness of life on Earth and beyond. Virginia L. Montgomery (hereafter VLM) cites the butterfly effect as one of two primary concepts informing *Eye Moon Cocoon*, her current exhibition at Women & Their Work.

The second is “the Coriolis effect,” which refers to the pattern of deflection taken by objects and currents not firmly connected to the ground as they whirl under the forces of gravity and the earth’s rotation. The Coriolis effect flows across spiraling weather vortices, eddies in a stream, dust devils, and myriad other natural



Luna Belle, 2023
4K Digital video, 05:30

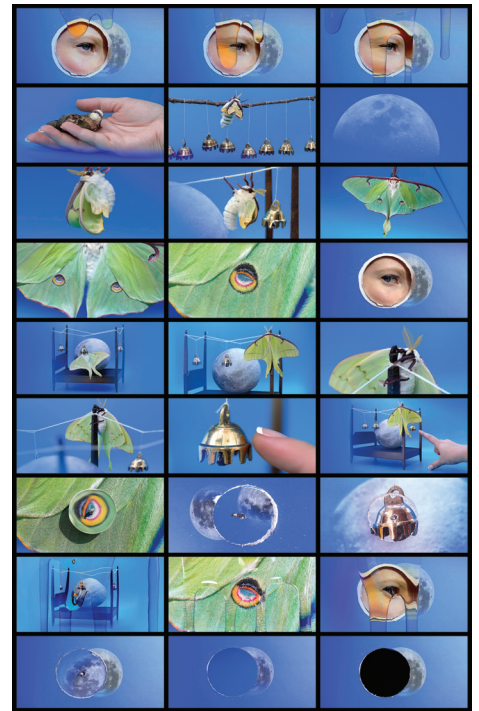
Egg Stone II, 2023
Memory foam and hand-carved marble, 84 x 72 x 32”

phenomena. VLM interprets the concept expansively to account for the recurrence of annular forms in nature and the cosmos, citing what a physicist once described to her as the circle’s “geometric efficiency.” VLM cites the butterfly and Coriolis effects explicitly as sources for her swirling aesthetic philosophy of the circle, or more properly the ovoid shape shared by the three objects named in the exhibition’s title, but in what follows, I suggest that this body of work conjures a third term: what I am calling “the moth effect.”

VLM has been raising and collaborating with native Texas butterflies and moths since the pandemic lockdowns of 2020, a period in which themes of interiority, metamorphosis, and emergence gained new saliency worldwide. The works in *Eye Moon Cocoon* feature one species in particular: *Actias Luna*, a creature with lime-green wings festooned with vibrant eyespots and a lifespan lasting roughly seven days. Their cocoons, VLM informs me, are rather heavy because they hold everything the Lepidopteran needs for their short life. Formerly a hungry caterpillar, the fully fledged moth—or imago—has no functioning mouth, anus, or digestive tract, meaning that VLM cannot easily incentivize them with food. They are, however, interested in two things: sex and light.

VLM works with the Lunas’ life cycles and desires without trying to control them. During a studio visit, we kept a basket of gestating cocoons nearby as we moved through the space. They were due to hatch soon, and VLM wanted to film their emergence and the important subsequent phase, when bodily fluids course outward through their wings, causing them to unfurl. VLM prefers even daylight for shooting, which illuminates the moths’ vibrant, if fleeting, colors. It also keeps them more still—when there is a concentrated light source, the moths are more frenetic, their sometimes fatal attraction to light ignited. Once she finishes shooting, she releases them into the environment to lay their eggs and continue their journey.

VLM explains how in nature, the Lunas’ flight



Moon Moth Bed Sequence II, 2023
Digital C-print, 26 x 40”

patterns are determined in part by their attempt to keep moonlight always on their wings, which causes them to fly in a looping arc that follows the curvature of the Earth. Their wings’ rounded eyespots make the species part of the family Saturniidae, so named for the resemblance of their ringed markings to the planet Saturn’s encircling asteroid belt. This relation, as well as the eyespots’ connotation of a gaze—the simultaneous awareness of seeing and being seen—are of great interest to VLM. As much as the eyespot attracts our visual attention, it also repels: the moths’ second set of unseeing eyes are understood evolutionarily as a form of self-defense, designed to give a potential predator the impression that their prey bears the face of a larger vigilant animal.

Deliciously concentrated in lengths ranging from two to seven minutes, VLM’s dreamlike video works contain rapid, rhythmic cuts and cross-dissolves that intentionally blur distinctions between image and object. *Moon Moth Bed*, the exhibition’s central video work, blends microphotography of Luna moth wings,



Eye Moon Cocoon, 2023, installation view

Cover Panel: *Eye Moon Cocoon*, 2023, installation view

public domain NASA lunar imagery, and a 3D-printed replica of the moon resting on a miniature version of the artist's own wooden Shaker bed frame. (The full-size bed is on view in the gallery as the sculpture *Bed with Sleeping Stone*.)

The dominant color in the video, and in the installation at large, is blue, the hue not only of the sky, water, and distance, but also of the projector or screen—what the artist calls an “arbitrary neutral between nothingness and digital content.” Against a blue backdrop, a moth emerges from a cocoon and onto VLM’s French-tip manicured hand, navigating perches hung with Tibetan bells, small enough for a moth to play. In the soundtrack, the tinkling of tiny bells mingles with a stalactite’s gentle drip, the low purr of a Texas thunderstorm, and other strangely appealing sounds. With them, VLM conjures a sonic atmosphere that feels like a soothing caress despite the occasional mechanical grind of another important tool in her iconographic arsenal: a hole saw adapter attached to a beloved Dewalt drill.



Eye, 2023, installation view
4K Digital video, 02:00



Honey Moon, 2023
Digital C-print, 20 x 30"

Seen piercing printed images of the moon, the eyespot, and the moon-bed scene, the drill transforms orb into portal, making a visual metaphor of the gaze’s penetrative aspect. Allegorizing the scopophilic drive to possess what we see, the drill destroys the image, leaving a void behind.¹ Often, the eye of the artist peeks through, as in her short video, *Eye*. For VLM, the drill serves multiple semiotic functions: “a yonic quest to put holes in everything,” an agent of her circular symbolic agenda, and a way of showing how an image offers visual access to its subject while withholding haptic experience. Although she delights in the destructive immediacy of the spinning drill, VLM seeks to balance it through the pouring of honey, a golden liquid prized across cultures and throughout history for both its medicinal properties and its sweetness. It’s a bonus, she notes, that the bubbles formed as it cascades down the screen are spherical.

In documentation for her performance *Luna Cocoons Meet the Moon Rocks with Mom and Me*, VLM describes going with her mother to visit the lunar rock vault at the Space Center

Houston to introduce some of her cocoons to the real lunar rock samples brought back to Earth by NASA astronauts. With this gesture, VLM sought to bring them as close as possible to the object of their desire while respecting a safe distance, staying behind the protective glass encasing the display. In the video, VLM slowly draws circles around the moon rocks with the cocoon in hand as an act of love. Here, the circle’s radial consistency functions as a model for secure attachment. Like the moth, we cannot help but be drawn toward other bodies: by desire, gravitation, or some combination of both, but some thresholds can’t be crossed. Like the Luna moth, we can never merge with our moons. Orbits, circles, and gravity function across VLM’s art as a unifying symbolic language, traversing micro to macro scales in a cyclical loop. Positing imagination as an engine of discovery, VLM recasts the condition of seeing and being seen as a source of mutuality and collective healing. As the artist writes, “We orbit together.”

Jana La Brasca is a researcher, writer, and PhD candidate in Art History at the University of Texas at Austin.

1. Referring to a “love of looking,” the term “scopophilia” derives from psychoanalysis, and the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey used it to describe how the visual logic of mainstream cinema often voyeuristically renders women’s bodies as erotic objects, rather than active subjects, a condition sometimes described as “the male gaze.” See Laura Mulvey, “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.” Screen 16, n. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

Virginia L. Montgomery (VLM)

EDUCATION

- 2016 MFA, Sculpture, Yale University, New Haven, CT
2008 BFA, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS & SCREENINGS

- 2023 *VLM: Tate Lates*, The Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom, curated by Valentine Umansky & Beatriz Garcia-Velasco
- 2021 *O Luna*, Aurora Picture Show, Houston, TX, curated by Mary Magsamen
Butterfly Birth Bed & Honey Moon, Public Digital Art Fund, Moscow, Russia, curated by Nina Mdivani
- 2020 *Dream Cocoon*, Hesse Flatow, New York, NY
Sky Loop, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX
- 2019 *Honey Moon*, Midnight Moment at Times Square, Times Square Art Alliance, New York, NY
Screens Series: Virginia L. Montgomery, New Museum, New York, NY, curated by Kate Wiener & Margot Norton
The Pony Hotel, Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany, curated by Antonina Krezdorn
Pony Cocoon, False Flag Projects, Queens, NY
- 2017 *Beyond Means*, Plymouth Rock, Zürich, Switzerland
Deep See, Harvard Film Archive, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
Portal, Particle Accelerator Memorial Project, Wright Laboratory, Yale Physics Department, Yale University, New Haven, CT
- 2016 *SOS Onshore Offshore*, Meyohas Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS & SCREENINGS

- 2023 *Day Jobs*, The Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX, curated by Veronica Roberts
Magical Home, Kling & Bang Gallery, Reykjavik, Iceland, curated by Kristín Ríkharðsdóttir
Substrate, Center for Contemporary Art Tel Aviv-Yafo, Tel Aviv, Israel, curated by Tamar Margalit
Beverly's, Beverly's NYC, Feira Material, Mexico City, Mexico, curated by Leah Dixon
Repopulations: New Horizons, NOosphere Arts, Brooklyn, NY, curated by Daniela Holban
Currents, Basket Books & Art, Houston, TX, curated by Laura Hughes & Edwin Smalling
O Luna, Female Eye Film Festival, Toronto, Canada
O Luna, Hyperreal Film Club, The Paramount Theatre, Austin, TX
- 2022 *Cared For*, The Blaffer Art Museum, Houston, TX, curated by Steven Matijcio
Celebrating Biodiversity, Houston Botanic Garden, Houston, TX, curated by Stephanie Mitchell
Cruel Optimism, Images Film Festival, Toronto, Canada, curated by Claudia Mattos
Yo trabajo con la tierra, Big Medium, Austin, TX, curated by Paloma Mayorga

- Synaptic*, Sculpture Month Houston, The Silos at Sawyer Yards, Houston, TX, curated by Volker Eisele
O Luna, Ann Arbor Film Festival, Ann Arbor, MI
- 2021 *After Carolee: Tender and Fierce*, Artpace, San Antonio, TX, curated by Annette DiMeo Carlozzi
Beyond Distance, Shenzhen New Media Art Festival, Shenzhen, China, curated by Xinyang Cai
Facing the World: Crit Group Reunion, The Contemporary Austin, Austin, TX, curated by Robin K. Williams & Andrea Mellard
Refamiliarization, Platform Artspace, University of California Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, curated by Julia Irwin & Justin Berne
The Word for World is Forest, Essex Flowers, New York, NY, curated by Linnea Vedder
Butterfly Birth Bed, Ann Arbor Film Festival, Ann Arbor, MI
Butterfly Birth Bed, Video Art & Experimental Film Festival, New York, NY
- 2020 *Exquisite Cinema of the Surreal*, Menil Collection, Houston, TX, curated by Mary Magsamen & Aurora Picture Show
Witch Hunt, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, Denmark, curated by Alison Karasyk & Jeppe Ugelvig
Baitball, Palazzo San Giuseppe, Polignano a Mare, Italy, curated by Like A Little Disaster Gallery
- 2019 *Cut Copy Sphinx*, New Orleans Film Festival, New Orleans, LA
Exchange Rate, Galveston Arts Center, Galveston, TX, curated by Dennis Nance
Looms, Sweetpass Sculpture Park, Dallas, TX, curated by Tamara Johnson & Trey Burns
- 2018 *Crash Test: The Molecular Turn*, La Panacée, Montpellier Contemporain, Montpellier, France, curated by Nicolas Bourriaud
An Unbound Knot in the Wind, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Hudson, NY, curated by Alison Karasyk
The Socrates Annual 2018, Socrates Sculpture Park, Queens, NY, curated by Jess Wilcox
Open Mind: Selva Aparicio & Virginia L. Montgomery, Crush Curatorial, New York, NY
A Kiss Under the Tail, Arsenal Contemporary, New York, NY, curated by Loreta Lamargese
- 2017 *In Practice: Material Deviance*, SculptureCenter, Queens, NY, curated by Alexis Wilkinson
Screening, Harvard Film Archive, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, curated by Kiyoto Koseki
- 2016 *Onsite Offsite Parasite*, Yale Sculpture MFA Exhibition, Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT
Partners, Abrons Arts Center, New York, NY, curated by Michael Queensland & Anoka Faruque
Things you can't unthink, Walter Phillips Gallery, The Banff Centre, Banff, Canada, curated by Peta Rake
All My Friends Are Rocks: Anissa Mack & Virginia L. Montgomery, 67 Ludlow, New York, NY



Luna Cocoon Meets the Moon Rocks at NASA, 2023
Digital C-print, 20 x 30"

WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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Women & Their Work is a visual and performing arts organization located in Austin that serves as a catalyst for new ideas in contemporary art. Since 1978, Women & Their Work has created significant opportunities for artists and audiences to experience contemporary art through ambitious exhibitions, commissions of new work, performances and programs that inform audiences of all ages. We have actively developed the careers of more than 2,000 women artists, presenting 337 visual art exhibitions, 164 music, dance and theater events, 30 spoken word and literary performances, 16 film festivals and 840 programs & education workshops with the goal of ensuring that diverse women artists are equitably represented in all forms of art. Women & Their Work helps meet an important need in Texas providing exhibition and performance opportunities and helping to attract critical attention to the work produced here; it is the only organization of its kind in the region and one of the few organizations in

the United States that dedicates itself to the work of women artists. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *ArtForum*, and on *National Public Radio* and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2020, the Smithsonian Archives of American Art acquired the 42-year archive of Women & Their Work ensuring that our entire history of the work of women artists and our website will be preserved in perpetuity.



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