

protozoans in the act of growing into spheroid plant life. The inflection throughout is of ominous metamorphosis, an almost atavistic fear of nature's force; in a plague year, these decades-old notations seem oracular.

While Bontecou's *Constellation of Drawings* was consigned to the side drawing gallery, Stuart's exhibition, *An Archaeology of Place*, was given the bulk of the gallery space. The presentation serves to anchor her in the moment minimalism got its hands dirty. (Stuart is a pioneering land artist, but most of her projects have recorded, rather than intervened in the earth.) Without challenging the austerity of the grid, large, multi-square, encaustic-covered panels such as *Moonlight (Manhattan)* (1990) and *Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico* (1989) possess a tactile immediacy, and, with plant materials collected on Stuart's walks embedded in the translucent, relatively pliant wax, a connection to the earth. (A 1988–89 series called *Brookings* serves a more direct documentary purpose, preserving decayed leaves with handwritten notations in the amber-like encaustic.) Though organized in regimented grids, these are not lifeless designs, but records of encounters and of an ongoing holistic relationship.

Although stylistically different, both Bontecou's and Stuart's work are assertions of social and personal, and thus political, intention. They rely on natural phenomena—largely invented in Bontecou's case, largely notated in Stuart's—to propose a dynamic, even unstable, but ongoing relationship with nature. While at the time of

these works' making neither artist aligned her art with the term "ecofeminist," within our current climate of global pandemic, political unrest, and economic uncertainty, this 30-something-year-old work reads as a cautionary rumination on the ties between humans and the natural world.

**(L.A. in S.F.)
Julie Weitz at
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It's August in Northern California and thousands of wildfires have collectively burned millions of acres across the state.¹ The alien quality of diffuse, yellow light and the choke of smoke-laden air feels familiar now, a reminder of seasons changing and the earth burning. As we adapt to these conditions and search for solutions, we must reckon with the certainty that California's intensifying climate is fueled in part by the exploitative colonialist mindset of land ownership over stewardship. Julie Weitz explores this terrain in a solo exhibition titled *GOLEM: A Call to Action*; the project is an urgent plea toward responsible land practices.

In Jewish folklore, the golem is a humanoid figure made from clay, often invoked to fight injustice. Weitz initially conjured her character, which she cheekily calls "My Golem," for a series of iterative videos in 2017 as a reaction to rising antisemitism and xenophobia in the United States. With thick white paint applied like clay

slip on her face and hands, and a deep blue slabbed around her eyes and mouth, the artist transforms herself into her conjured apparition. In the exhibition, on view at The Contemporary Jewish Museum (The CJM) in San Francisco, My Golem turns her blue-clay eyes to intersectional issues of climate change and ecological disaster. The exhibition includes three videos: one, *Golem v. Golem* (2021), was released via The CJM's Instagram account and website during Passover, and two others play on a loop in a cave-like room off the museum's front lobby. Using unceded land in California as both character and set, the two looped videos connect the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* ("world repair") with Indigenous conservation. With capitalist structures, which are rooted in colonialism, rapidly advancing climate change and continuing to promote land theft, what does it mean for two distinct communities to value and honor land that has been structurally denied to them?

In *My Golem as a Wildland Firefighter* (2021), introductory on-screen text explains that Weitz has sent My Golem to uncaded Washoe land in Tahoe National Forest to train in wildland firefighting techniques. In a hard hat and with the Shem—a collection of Hebrew letters that spell the name of God—written on her forehead, she works the land, often stumbling in Chaplinesque style. In one shot, she endlessly wraps an ineffectual garden hose around her body, resulting in a hapless tangle. In another, she gazes into the sun, her clay face cracking with worry, as if emotionally worn thin by humanity's cruelty



Top: Julie Weitz, *Prayer for Burnt Forests (4)* (2021).
 Archival inkjet print, dimensions variable.
 Image courtesy of the artist and The Contemporary
 Jewish Museum. Photo: Aaron Farley.

Bottom: Julie Weitz, *My Golem as a Wildland
 Firefighter (PSA)* (film still 2) (2020).
 Image courtesy of the artist
 and The Contemporary Jewish Museum.

and carelessness. Like Chaplin, Weitz's performance toes the line between slapstick and moral outrage. In this case, the balancing act brings the looming crisis of environmental disaster to a human scale. With an activist's fervor, My Golem seems to ask if collective laughter and tears can lead to collective liberation.

At the end of *Wildland Firefighter*, My Golem lays spread-eagle in a burned circle on the forest floor, her high-visibility fire retardant shirt and masked face glowing against the blackened ground. The circle is evidence of a controlled burn—ashes, when mixed with soil, encourage regrowth. "Cultural burning" is the Indigenous practice of using low-grade fires to reshape the landscape, clearing dry brush to prevent megafires and to spur the regeneration of culturally significant species.² For most of the 20th century, the government banned these Native fire rituals in favor of a monolithic fire suppression policy. This practice, ironically, propels megafires by creating extreme conditions; when a forest fire rages, the devastation is far more unpredictable and widespread. In *Wildland Firefighter*'s striking final scene, My Golem lays amidst a quietly transitioning landscape, a mythological mud creature surrounded by mud. Her training complete, like a reverse phoenix, she can return to the earth from which she came.

On a loop after *Wildland Firefighter* is *Prayer for Burnt Forests* (2021), a film that frames an ecological epiphany and centers around a prayer written by Weitz and Rabbi Zach Fredman. On Tongva land in Southern California, My Golem uses the landscape

as a playground, springing up and down a charred tree. She climbs atop a hill, and after taking in the vastness of destruction around her, falls, tumbling through the sand. A mournful woodwind signals the beginning of the prayer, which is sung in Hebrew: "Around my feet I carve a circle in the earth." My Golem attempts to heal the land, at one point tying the fringe of her prayer shawl around a fallen tree and trying to right it. As both she and the tree come crashing to the ground, My Golem's approach shifts from futile acts of repair to a spiritual recognition of respect. She urgently circles her arms from earth to sky, signaling regrowth, as the final lines of the prayer are sung.

From learning to be a protector of the trees in *Wildland Firefighter* to her impish interaction with the landscape in the beginning of *Prayer*, we see My Golem's self-reflective journey as she gradually begins to understand fire's regenerative power. A clay being, she acts as her own raw material, and via pantomime, she shapes herself through the emotional spectrum of grief. Alien to capitalism's complex motives, My Golem embodies a quiet protest that demands acknowledgment of social and environmental injustices. The video ends with a call to support the repatriation of Tongva land in the Angeles National Forest, where the film was shot, and the didactics accompanying the piece implore the viewer to recite "A Prayer for Burnt Forests"³ in nature as a gesture of respect and atonement.

In the prayer, the lines "We call to you angels of

creation / Earth, Water, Wind and Fire / From land that is not ours" reference both the Jewish diaspora and the ongoing colonial occupation of Indigenous lands. Weitz reframes the California landscape from an exploitable resource to a sacred entity, asserting Indigenous wisdom through the cipher of Jewish folklore and spirituality. Still dispossessed of their ancestral lands, recognition of Native Nations' invaluable knowledge is only the first step toward climate healing and cultural preservation. While structural change is imperative in the face of climate disaster, Weitz's demonstration of intersectional stewardship asks viewers to reshape their own relationships to the earth from possession and control to reciprocal protection. This land, with its changing climate—burning and healing in an endless annual cycle—is not ours. It never was.

1. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, "Incidents Overview," accessed August 25, 2021, <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/>.

2. For example, Northern California tribes use the native shrub hazel to weave baskets traditionally used in birthing rituals. After a fire, hazel grows long, straight branches that allow it to be woven. Without fire, it grows in a tangle. Fire also plays a role in the life cycles of historically important Indigenous food sources, such as acorns and salmon. Page Buono, "Quiet Fire: Indigenous tribes in California and other parts of the U.S. have been rekindling the ancient art of controlled burning," *The Nature Conservancy*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.nature.org/en-us/magazine/magazine-articles/indigenous-controlled-burns-california/>.

3. The prayer is available to download as a PDF at The Contemporary Jewish Museum's website: https://res.cloudinary.com/the-contemporary-jewish-museum/image/upload/v1624292666/exhibition/2021_golem-prayer-card-takeaway_v03.pdf.