

Jill O'Bryan

b. 1956, Chicago, IL

lives and works in Las Vegas, NM & New York, NY

@jillobryan



Jill O'Bryan (b. 1956) divides her time between New York City and the expansive mesas of New Mexico. Her drawings and paintings reveal moments of connection with Earth's elements: air, earth, water, sky, fire. In 2000, she commenced a series of Breath Drawings, encapsulating time by recording and counting her own breaths in layers of graphite marks on paper. This fascination with breathing, with universality, and with recording encounters with nature has influenced various bodies of work in a range of media.

With an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and a Ph.D. from New York University in Aesthetic Theory and Criticism, O'Bryan has exhibited widely, including at the National Gallery of Art Library, DC (2021); Margarete Roeder Gallery, New York City (2016, 2018, 2019, 2024); The New Mexico Museum of Art (2021, 2024), Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Fe (2017), The Phillips

Collection, Washington DC (2014), The Hafnarfjörður Centre of Culture and Fine Art, Iceland (2013), Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University, St. Louis (2012), Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, NJ (2012), University of Richmond Museum (2012), Katonah Museum of Art, NY (2011), Danese Gallery, New York (2011), and the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente, Segovia, Spain (2009).

Artist Statement

I am enamored of experiences shared by human beings across time and around the world. The aura of collected experiences imbues objects and places with intrigue and historicity. Objects held by many hands, buildings utilized for millenia, art seen in a multitude of contexts, but also, more intimately, essential experiences we all hold within our bodies: breathing, being awash in moonlight, lying down on wilderness rocks that have been sculpted by wind, rain, animals, and others' footprints. These are the corporeal, tactile experiences of being here, alive in a human body, that I use as starting points.

My work mines a spirited space between the corporeal and the imagined, the universal and the personal, the literal and the intuitive. Across various media and at different scales, I utilize intuition, observation, contemplation, and a my own invented processes of art making to render my experiences of being: breath as a corporeal repetition over time; interactions and explorations of the land; the five elements: earth, air, water, fire, sky; and in the new series, Breathing into the Moon, moonlight – its presence and absence.

The moon is older than we know. Its movement and cycles are continuously witnessed. Its gravitational pull affects women's bodies, ocean tides, our moods, the very tilt of our planet. We bask in the light of a full moon, and note its absence, knowing that despite the invisibility of a new moon, it is ever present. The moon rises and sets, waxes and wanes. I recognize that my experiences of the moon are shaped by changing spatial and geographic perspectives as well as uniquely personal circumstances; yet I yearn to realize some aspect of the nature of our collected experiences of it across time and space. The Breathing into the Moon images are intuitive, abstract, and even metaphysical. I create them through a spontaneously gestural yet carefully edited process. I invite gold leaf, tar, ink, and even meteorites to suggest the aspects of space and experience that we cannot see. These materials rub, splash, cut, graft, overlay, migrate, orbit, shine, absorb, and drift, depicting the simultaneously infinite realms of galaxies suggested through planetary motion, as well as the behavior of infinitesimally small photons of reflected moonlight. These photons of light that wash us in moonlight started on the moon before traveling to each of us. Literally they are our connection to the moon. Remember the moon is the closest celestial body to us, at 238,900 miles. It takes 1.28 seconds for light reflected off the moon to reach earth. I look up at the moon, and lie down on the ground and look up at the moon.

To create the land drawings ("frottages"), I spread large sheets of paper onto the desert floor. Lying atop, I grind graphite into the paper until an impression of the ground below takes form. The paper warps and bends; the markings emerge and reveal. The process is profoundly physical and my corporeal connection with the land is recorded along with the cracks and crevices formed in the earth over time.

While I began as a landscape painter many decades ago, I now see the vast physical places we inhabit as multi-dimensional. Every square inch contains billions of microbes, microscopic species, chemical and quantum interactions that we do not see with the naked eye. I hold this awareness together with understanding that our environment expands beyond our horizon into distances that we can only comprehend through planetary motion.

With regard to art making, I am interested in building images through abstraction, but also inventing processes through experiences of breath, lying on the ground, meditating in moonlight. Throughout my art making processes, I inhabit a push/pull and a give/take interaction with the elements I explore, which I transfer into my elemental materials: paint, graphite, gold leaf, ink, which in turn pull and push me into new territory. With the resolution of each new image, I am inspired to interact further, to see what comes next.