

# GEOETHICS

WORKS BY YING KIT CHAN



GEOETHICS: Works by Ying Kit Chan

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Artworks: Ying Kit Chan  
Introduction: Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch’ien  
Essay: Louise Siddons  
Epilogue: Ying Kit Chan

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*Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin your  
country of its beauty, its riches or its romance.*

*Theodore Roosevelt*

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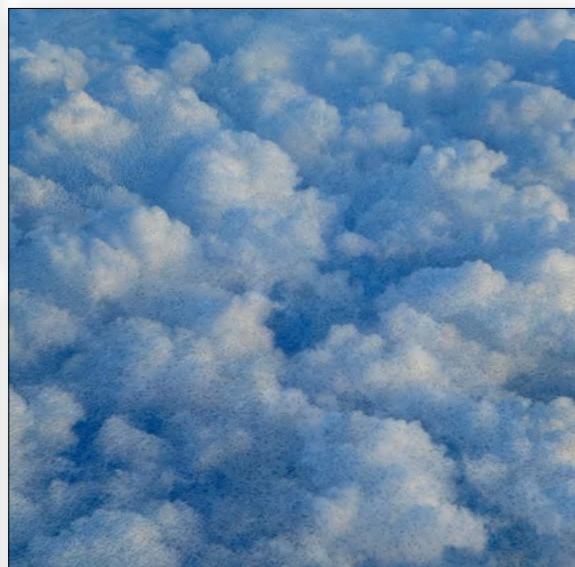
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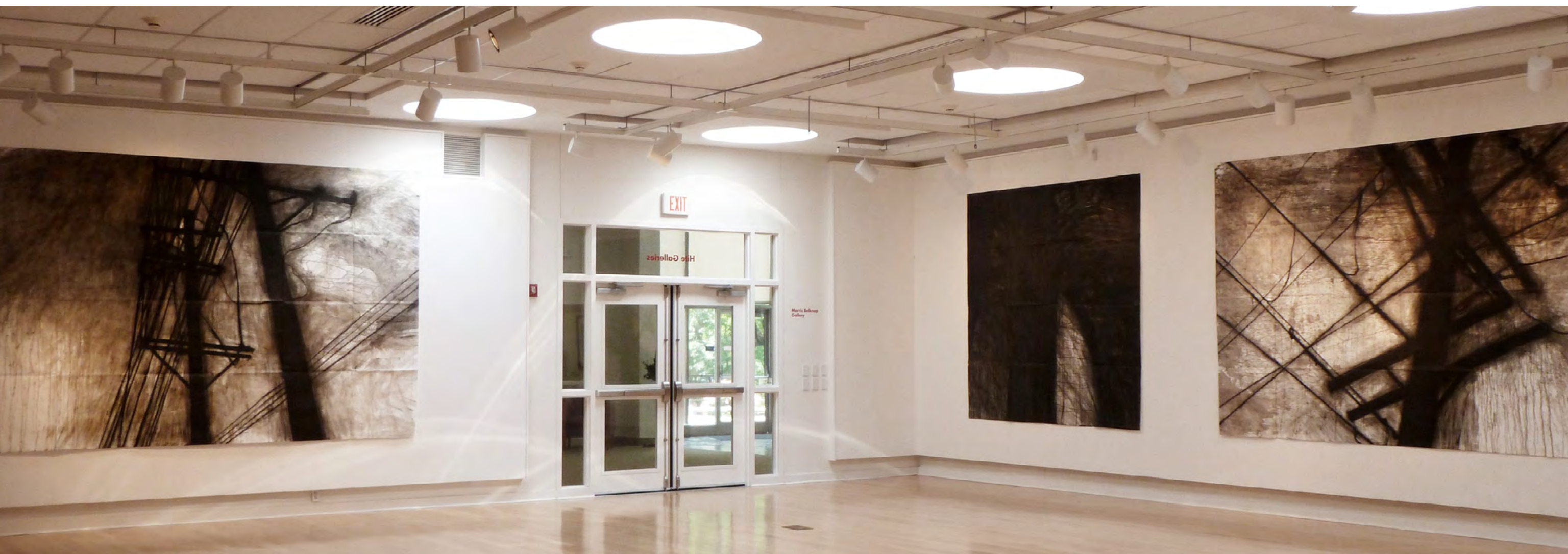


























## Toward an Aesthetic of Geoethics

Ying Kit Chan

### The Manificent Earth

On December 7, 1972, the crew of the Apollo 17 spacecraft took a snapshot of the Earth from 29,000 kilometers. This photograph is a transformative image showcasing a breathtaking blue planet of oceans and continents partially covered by white clouds. This image is now famously known as “The Blue Marble,” and has become the iconic symbol of the environmental movement.

Eighteen years later, another photograph of the Earth was taken on February 14, 1990, by the Voyager 1 space probe from a record distance of 6 billion kilometers. Carl Sagan entitled this 0.12-pixel picture of the Earth “The Pale Blue Dot” and wrote, “There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we’ve ever known.”<sup>1</sup>

Both images challenge us to feel privileged to live on such a rich and unique planet as well as inspire us to react to the current environmental crisis caused by human exploitation and negligence.

### The Great Acceleration

Since industrialization, humans have made such a significant impact on the Earth that necessitated the naming of a new geologic epoch, Anthropocene. The concept of Anthropocene was anticipated as early as the 19th century and the term is now frequently used in the scientific community and in popular culture. The International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS), the organization in charge of establishing the stratigraphic chart of geologic time, is working on ratifying the adoption of Anthropocene as a new geologic epoch. A group of scientists who advises the ICS on the adoption recently published a paper proposing that the Anthropocene commenced on July 16, 1945. This determination is based on the vast acceleration of the degradation of the Earth’s geology and ecosystems attributed to the Industrial revolution and the historical Alamogordo test explosion.<sup>2</sup> It is alarming that in just a few decades, a blink on the geologic timeline, we have witnessed the “Great Acceleration” during which our magnificent planet has been depleted of its natural resources, pristine landscapes, and livable environments.

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 6.

<sup>2</sup> J. Zalasiewicz, et al., “When did the Anthropocene begin? A mid-twentieth century boundary level is stratigraphically optimal,” *Quaternary International* (2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2014.11.045>.



## Geoethics and Justice

Such an accelerating environmental crisis calls for a change in our conduct. The word Geoethics denotes our responsibility to the Earth, implying the required attitudes and actions for the scrupulous treatment of the Earth and its inhabitants.

In the history of environmental ethics, earlier thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold were inspired by the Romantics’ emotional experience of the Sublime. The Romantics admired the grandeur of the wilderness, and voiced their passion to preserve the natural features and phenomena. In the 1960s, Rachel Carson devoted her life to fighting against harmful chemical applications and called for actions to save the future of the planet. Her book *Silent Spring* inspired the modern environmental movement. Alternatively, Arne Næss suggested a deeper philosophical, intellectual, and spiritual approach to include ecocentric insights to

care for the Earth and all species beyond the “shallow” anthropocentric worldview.<sup>3</sup>

Geoethics provides professional standards for geoscientists to consider when interacting with Earth systems.<sup>4</sup> This philosophy is also expanded to all communities invoking awareness and a sense of duty, and cultivating a compassion for the suffering of others. Environmental justice must be a priority in Geoethics. We must recognize the unequal impacts of burdens to different countries, regions, communities, and individuals. Environmental ethics must integrate ethical thinking with social justice, and incorporate the positions of ecofeminism, social ecology, and other environmental justice perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Drengson and Bill Devall, ed., *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writing of Arne Naess* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> “Definition of Geoethics,” the International Association for Promoting Geoethics (IAPG). See <https://www.geoethics.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph R. DesJardins, *Environmental Ethics* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), 224-257.

## Ethics and Aesthetics

Since the 1960s, environmental art, or eco-art, emerges as a genre of visual art and a form of environmental activism. During the early 20th Century art history, activist art is often dismissed as propaganda and has for a long time been marginalized in the mainstream art world.

In the Western philosophical tradition, ethics and aesthetics each occupy a distinct compartment. However, they need not be and must not be mutually exclusive. In his 1987 Nobel Prize lecture, Joseph Brodsky proclaimed, “every new aesthetic reality makes man’s ethical reality more precise... For aesthetics is the mother of ethics.”<sup>6</sup>

When Immanuel Kant introduced the concept of disinterestedness in his *The Critique of Judgment*, he initiated an art theory that is self-reflexive, existing only for its own sake, and that strips art of its instrumental value. In the name of autonomy of art, modern art

history has witnessed successive movements of formalism rejecting the instrumentality of art, sterilizing art of its social function, while surrendering its autonomy to the neoliberal economy.

On the bright side, Carol Becker observes in recent developments that the pendulum has swung toward an art practice of social concern and commitment.<sup>7</sup> Becker identified the aesthetic project of Hebert Marcuse as a viable model for its subversive potential of art. Herbert Marcuse understood that didactic art may lose its efficacy to inspire for social change and emancipation. In his last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse rightfully articulated that aesthetic form is essential to its social function, and only through the integration of form and function, art can retake possession of the agency for resistance, and offer hope for a brighter future.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Brodsky Nobel Lecture. See <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1987/brodsky/lecture/>.

<sup>7</sup> Carol Becker, “Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art,” in Carol Becker, ed., *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society, and Social Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 113-129.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977).



List of works

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Cover **Red Alert Series**, enamel paint on discarded plastic, 2018.

**Table of Contents** *Bird 2020*, digital print. Originally this was part of an installation entitled *Birds*, made of discarded grocery bags. The title is inspired by the plastic bags that are entwined in the trees in American cities. *Birds* was presented in the exhibition *Equilibrium* hosted by ArtScience Exhibit of Berlin. It was installed in the courtyard of Palazzo Albrizzi-Capello, Venice, Italy, and was taken down after a thunderstorm. The materials were re-used to create this digital print in 2020.

**7 Ten Thousand Things**, 萬物, one of the three panels, digital print, each panel 42 by 42 inches, 2014.

**8 The Way Is A Void**, woodcut print, 42 x 42 inches, 1977. This work is inspired by the text and philosophy of *Dao De Jing* (Chapter 4), original text 道冲而用之或不盈. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art.

**9 Live Deep**, diptych, ink and pigment print, 86 by 42 inches, 2014. This work is inspired by a quote from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, “I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.”

**10 Live Deep**, Detail. The text of the *Heart Sutra* (心經) translated by Xuanzhang (玄奘), written in calligraphy by Tang Dynasty calligrapher Ouyang Xun (歐陽詢), is printed on the image of the Walden Pond.

**11 Ten Thousand Things**, 萬物, 89 x 86 inches, three panels, each panel 42 by 42 inches, 2014.

**12 Ten Thousand Things**, Detail.

**15, 16 Coal Train**, West Virigina, charcoal on paper, 42 x 84 inches, 1983.

**17, 18 Industrial Land**, charcoal on paper, 42 x 58 inches, 1994.

**19, 20 Industrial Structure**, charcoal on paper, 42 x 84 inches, 1986.

**22 Humanity Is An Ocean**, acrylic on discarded fabric, 100 x 140 inches, 2016.

**38 Industrial Site**, acrylic on Tyvek, 96 by 120 inches, 2014.

**41, 42 Walden Pond**, at the site where Henry David Thoreau built his cabin, digital photography, 2008.

**43, 44 Deep Ecology**, Installation View, Cressman Center for Visual Arts, University of Louisville, 2016.

**45 London Plane Trees**, digital photography, Nanjing, 2014. During the 1920s, thousands of London plane trees, locally known as wutongs (梧桐), were planted around the areas and streets leading to the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum in Nanjing (1925-31). The London plane trees are highly valued by the Nanking residents for providing green canopies in the summer and the ability to absorb carbon dioxide and smog.

**46 London Plane**, ink drawing, 42 by 42 inches, 2016.

**47 Trees**, trees at the Graveyard of the 72 Martyrs, Guangzhou, China, ink on paper, 42 by 42 inches, 2014.

**48 Osage Orange Trees**, Joe Creason Park, Louisville, Kentucky, digital photography, 2016. The name Osage Orange is a combination of a Native AmericanTribe, the Osage, and the smell and appearance of the large fruit it produces. The wood of the Osage Orange was highly valued by Plains Indians for making their bows (https://louisvillezoo.org).

**49 50 Do Not**, 不要, Diptych, digital print, 42 x 84 inches, 2014. The work “Do Not” is inspired by a quote from President Theodore Roosevelt, “Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin your country of its beauty, its riches or its romance.”

**53 Gulf Fire #93**, monoprint, 14 x 14 inches, 2012.

**54 Gulf Fire #131**, monoprint, 14 x 14 inches, 2012.

**55 Gulf Fire #71**, monoprint, 14 x 14 inches, 2012.

**56 Gulf Fire #92**, monoprint, 14 x 14 inches, 2012.

**57 58 Gulf Fire**, installation view of 120 prints, Cressman Center, 2014

**61 Tar Balls**, 2014.

**62 Tar Ball**, 2014.

**63 Duhkha**, installation of tar balls, Art Space at Untitled, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 2016.

**64 Duhkha**, installation of tar balls, Cressman Center, University of Louisville, 2014.

**67 68 Humanity Is An Ocean**, 人類是海洋, acrylic on discarded fabrics, 92 x 140 inches, 2016.

**69, 70 Geoethics exhibition**, Installation view, Art Space at Untitled, Oklahoma City, 2016.

**73, 74 Convenience**, 便利, acrylic on discarded textile, 96 x 202 inches, 2016.

**75, 76** Detail, **Convenience**, acrylic on discarded fabric, 96 x 202 inches, 2016.

**79 Warehouse**, charcoal on paper, 42 x 84 inches, 1996

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**81 Cooling Towers**, digital photography, 2018.

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**84 Oil Refinery**, Louisiana, digital photography, 2018.

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**90 Structure**, Louisiana, digital photography, 2018.

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**96 Red Alert** exhibition, installation view, University of Montevallo, 2018.

**97, 98 Convenience**, acrylic on discarded plastic, 100 x 220 inches, 2018.

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**101, 102 Red Alert**, installation view, 2018.

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**104 Bitterness**, 苦, enamel on discarded plastic, 80 x 60 inches, 2018.

**105** Detail, **Red Alert**, enamel on discarded plastic, 6 x 10 inches, 2018.

**106 Karma**, acrylic on discarded plastic, 40 x 20 inches, 2019. This work is constructed in the form of the Chinese character 業 (Karma) which is an important Buddhist concept of the law of cause and effect. *Karma* was originally created for a 2018 exhibition at the Bernheim Gallery of the Louisville Free Public Library to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). This work reflects on Shelley’s prophetic vision of the unpredictable consequences of scientific inventions and serves as an alarm to the catastrophic state of plastic contamination and pollution in our environment.

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**119 Seaweed**, acrylic on discarded plastic, 120 by 120 inches, 2018.

**120 Seaweed**, close-up, 2019.

**121 Seaweed**, close-up, 2019.

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**134 Water**, Ink drawing, 2020.

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