

***Lands, Real and Imagined: Women Artists Respond  
to the Art and Travel Writings of  
Maria Graham (1785–1842)***

Fisher Gallery, Otterbein University  
Curated by Patricia Frick and Janice Glowski  
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**L**ands, Real and Imagined: Women Artists Respond to the Art and Travel Writings of Maria Graham (1785–1842), on exhibit from February 1 until July 15, 2022 at the Fisher Gallery, Otterbein University (Westerville, Ohio), presented the work of five women artists and their contemporary responses to Maria Graham's life and work in their respective countries. Graham, a nineteenth-century English writer, artist, and scientist, traveled to Chile, Italy, India, Spain, and Brazil during her prolific career. The artists were Isabel Cauas (Chile), Francesca Genna (Italy), Kavita Shah (India), Paula Bonet (Spain), and Leila Danzinger (Brazil). All five artists work in the media of print-making and paper-related processes, a link to Graham and her drawings and works on paper.

The curators who conceived of the exhibition and brought the artists together were Victorian scholar Patricia Frick, PhD, Professor of English at Otterbein University, and Asian Art Historian Janice Glowski, PhD, Director of Museums and Galleries at Otterbein University. Marking the bicentennial anniversary of Maria Graham's arrival in Chile, Dr. Frick and Dr. Glowski collaborated with the five artists, sharing research and video discussions of Graham's writings and life story. Dr. Frick and Dr. Glowski worked with each artist to find a point of connection with Graham's life or work that resonated with their individual studio practices.

Isabel Cauas responded to Maria Graham and her Chilean travels with twelve vignettes, an evocative visual narrative including eight

atmospheric monotypes punctuated by four objects that referred to Graham's daily life in Chile. Each image and object was presented with a quotation from Graham's Chilean journals. The quotations, in chronological order from April, 1822 through February, 1823, represented the time period from Graham's arrival in Chile to her departure.

The monotypes (each approximately 16" x 20") were landscapes and seascapes balancing specificity with fleeting, gestural mark making. The painterly prints had an atmospheric quality that suggested the watercolors of Emil Nolde. Each composition, with its distinctive point of view, implied a human presence while being devoid of figuration.

The objects that Cauas selected to illustrate Graham's experiences were referred to in her journals. They included a traditional mug and metal straw for drinking mate (an indigenous herbal tea), a chamomile bouquet hung in an inverted manner as if to preserve the blossoms, a piece of indigenous pottery, and a chunk of lava signifying the catastrophic earthquake that Graham described with scientific precision in her journals.

The prints and objects complemented one another as metaphorical and tangible responses to Graham's tumultuous time in Chile. It

began with the death of Graham's husband, the captain of the ship that brought her to Chile. It continued with the development of Graham as an independent woman, defying cultural conventions and gender-based expectations. Loss, adjustment, independence, clarity of purpose, and determination are traits that one identifies when reading Graham's Chilean journals. Cauas captured these essential aspects of Graham's character in her installation. Choosing titles such as "Arrival" and "Solitude" for the monotypes, Cauas incorporated biographical information that allowed Maria Graham to become more than a historical figure.

Cauas created a cinematic quality as one followed the sequence of images and objects across a gallery wall. The accompanying texts, below the images, were like the subtitles in a silent film. Reading the journal entries drew the viewer into the images and into Graham's personal narrative. The use of text was an effective tool for setting a pace for viewers as they moved from image to object to image through the installation. This approach was a subtle nod to the reality of the Victorian era, when daily written communication and reflection was a way of life for women of Graham's background.

By entering the exhibition through the lens of Isabel Cauas's

work, the stage was set for viewing the other artists' approaches to Maria Graham.

Francesca Genna (Palermo, Italy) responded to Maria Graham's expertise as a scientist, specifically in the area of botany. Genna found resonance in her own exploration of organic pigment sources, hand-made papers, and innovative book-binding solutions.

Like Cauas, Genna presented her work in an installation format. In a gallery area that suggested a shallow studio or library, Genna created large-scale woodcuts that hung horizontally across the back wall of the space. The prints were dominated by cross-sectional, organic shapes of wood that were printed in naturalistic colors. Some of the irregular shapes overlapped in the prints, creating secondary colors. The woodcuts had the dynamism and fluidity of Helen Frankenthaler's relief prints. These expansive, abstracted landscapes provided the backdrop for the installation. Moving forward in the space, Genna installed a collection of small-scale books on narrow, transparent shelves. The shelves were suspended from the ceiling with thin filament that suggested weightlessness. The papers and pigments used in the folded books had a delicacy that illustrated the artist's embrace of the ephemeral.

Genna did a masterly job of developing the middle ground between these two distinct series of works with a collection of woodcuts printed from cross-sectional pieces of a tree. The circular shapes were printed repeatedly, in violet tones, on a horizontal paper surface. The prints were suspended in a manner like the bookshelves. Although the patterning and texture of the prints were visually engaging in themselves, Genna was also documenting specific Italian trees, plants, and vegetation.

Genna's in-depth engagement with materiality and organic material sources, and her thorough knowledge of botany, offered a contemporary counterpoint to Maria Graham's botanical drawings and studies.

Kavita Shah (Vadodara, India) chose to create a tableau for her contemporary installation. The setting suggested a sitting room, with a Victorian upholstered chair, an ornate table on which rested an array of photographic portraits of individuals dressed in traditional Indian attire, and a mannequin displaying an elaborate and colorful sari. Framing this stage set were long, draped pieces of white translucent fabric.

In preparing for the installation, Shah traveled to Mumbai and photographed specific monuments

that Maria Graham had visited during her travels in India. Shah printed the images using the nineteenth-century photographic process cyanotype. She tinted the prints with tea to suggest the subtle tones of early photography. Less obvious, yet astutely considered, Shah photographed both historical buildings and sculptures in a manner that suggests the “picturesque” point of view valued by Westerners when looking at India.

Having established a setting out of the Raj, Shah proceeded to negate its colonial assumptions. She did so by using the traditional printmaking technique of woodcuts and imagery associated with Indian culture such as animals, birds, and organic patterns. Shah’s insightful insinuation into this nineteenth-century setting took form by boldly overlapping the tinted cyanotypes that covered the back wall of the room with her colorful woodcut prints.

Similarly, she printed the bird, flower, and pattern motifs on the gauzy fabric that framed the tableau. By using intense colors and distinct shapes, Shah infused energy and dynamism into a static environment. The woodcut imagery advanced visually while also overwhelming the staid setting.

Shah’s deft use of understatement to comment on Western visual tropes succeeded because of

her clarity of purpose and careful selection and placement of both found objects (such as the furniture pieces) and her ability to take traditional sources and repurpose them through a contemporary lens.

The last two artists in the exhibition, Paula Bonet (Barcelona, Spain) and Leila Danzinger (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) presented their work in a traditional gallery manner, using the grid as a means of organizing their narratives.

Paula Bonet chose an episode from Graham’s history of Spain as the impetus for her series of watercolor drawings. (Graham wrote a history of the country. She did not keep journals of her travels in Spain.) In one episode, Graham wrote about a citizen army of women led by a woman named “Kennava.” The women fought valiantly against the Spanish in the “Siege of Haarlem” in 1572–73.

In response, Bonet created a grid of drawings in three rows of twelve images, each approximately 18” X 24”, presented in a horizontal configuration. The images employed three motifs: rock or stone forms, gestural bunches of branches or arrows, and face or mask imagery. Each drawing presented one of these motifs painted centrally on a blank sheet. Fluid brushstrokes conveyed immediacy in Bonet’s palette of variegated grays and browns. Bonet’s manner

of painting the face/mask images echoed the figural work of Marlene Dumas.

The grid of drawings acted as visual shorthand for the battle that Graham described. The powerful movement in the brush marks offered graphic clarity. Within the three rows one saw variations in the sequencing of the motifs. They varied in shape and size from panel to panel. The brushstrokes suggested the urgency of the moment. Bonet's choice of heavy, yet slightly warped sheets of paper lightly pinned to the wall communicated both decisive action and vulnerability.

The grid of drawings functioned as a minimalist history painting, employing only essential elements to suggest that one was in a moment of battle while also being in a moment frozen in time.

Leila Danzinger examined Graham's Brazilian journals as well as her own grandmother's writings about Brazilian history for her work in the exhibition. Danzinger's silkscreen prints focused on images of significant women in Brazilian culture, all named "Maria."

Creating six poster-like screen prints, Danzinger used the image of Maria Graham as well as the Brazilian "Marias" in gridded formats. Wallet-size images were assembled onto horizontal surfaces approximately 32"x 40". The stacked registers of portraits filling each

panel echoed Warhol's "Marilyn" screen-printed paintings.

The grid was constructed with six rows of portraits and twelve faces in each row. As each face was repeated, the images evolved from distinct to misregistered to abstracted. Images of the historical "Marias" appear in the subsequent panels. The visually arresting prints were presented as a frieze dominating one wall. Danzinger effectively employed color as a means of transformation. The dominant colors in each panel transitioned from blue-greens to red-violets to panels of violet, red, and blue. Danzinger described the printing process and the material nature of creating as a "form of thinking" that has an intuitive basis. This concept was communicated in her use of loosely registered images that could be read as a visual journal where Danzinger's images represented her autographic content, paralleling Graham's journal pages.

*Lands, Real and Imagined: Women Artists Respond to the Art and Travel Writings of Maria Graham (1785-1842)* maintained the spirit of Maria Graham's travels. Although its run at the Fisher Gallery has ended, the exhibition will be presented in a second venue in Valparaiso, Chile in spring 2023. An illustrated catalog will be available at that time.