

# **Elements of the natural, 1950-1992 : selections from the drawing collection, the Museum of Modern Art, May 7- August 25, 1998**

Author

Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)

Date

1998

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

[www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/207](http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/207)

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—  
from our founding in 1929 to the present—is  
available online. It includes exhibition catalogues,  
primary documents, installation views, and an  
index of participating artists.

Archive  
MoMA  
1802

# Elements of the Natural: 1950–1992

## Selections from the Drawings Collection

The Museum of Modern Art, May 7–August 25, 1998

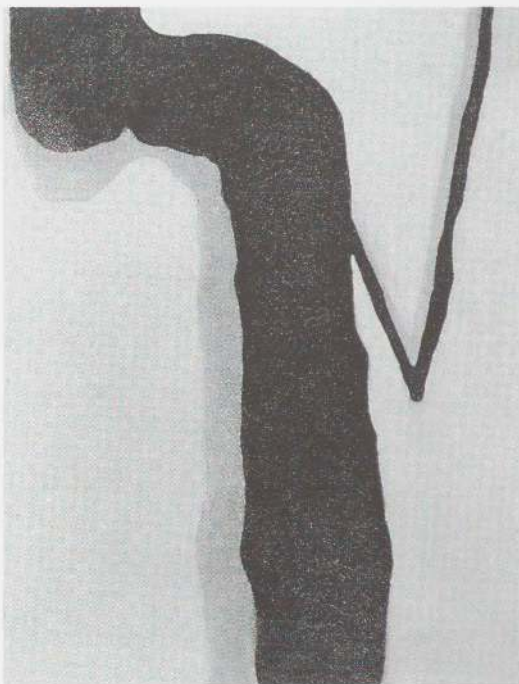
### The Museum of Modern Art Library

From the beginnings of modern art, a variety of artists, most notably Paul Cézanne and Claude Monet, found in nature a primary source of artistic inspiration. Soon afterwards, nature as subject matter was frequently abandoned by the avant-garde in preference of the drama of urban society and the new stylistic challenges that it provided. The spectacle of nature, most often defined by landscape, was consequently relegated to a secondary status in the hierarchy of artistic genres. While not entirely dismissed by the modern artist, nature as subject now seemed, in many ways, to be in direct conflict with the notion of modern art.

Emphasis on both the material and form of the industrial landscape continued to color the iconography of modern art until just after World War II. It is during this period, shadowed by the omnipresence of the atomic bomb—considered to be the most horrific product of industrial technology—that many artists of the era began to question the values of progress in which they had placed their faith. Amid this atmosphere of nuclear anxiety, these artists began to return to

the natural world for inspiration, newly appreciating its immaterial beauty, as well as its impermanence: a quality suddenly urgent in light of the absolute destructive capabilities of modern technology.

Focusing on the years of 1950–1992, *Elements of the Natural* begins during this



Georgia O'Keeffe. *Drawing X*. 1959. Charcoal, 24 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 18" (63.2 x 47.3 cm). Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (by exchange), 1972.

period when the natural world once again became raw material for creativity and continues through the contemporary era. The works included are not to be considered as part of any organized "back to nature" movement, nor was the selection based on any stylistic similarities or progression. Rather, all share a common element: an individual search on the part of the artist to capture the essence of nature.

Under the rubric of "landscape art," Milton Avery's *Dune Bushes* (1958), Joan Mitchell's *Untitled* (1992), and Vija Celmins's *Untitled (Ocean)* (1970) capture the timeless essence of the landscape theme. However, their depictions of the tangible world of land and water are informed by a new vocabulary: simplification, abstraction, and elimination of spatial referents. In contrast, Ellen Phelan's works from the *Loon Lake* series (1983) and Per Kirkeby's two *Untitled* works (both 1977) also depict an essentialist view of the landscape but express concern with the intangible elements of light and atmosphere as translated through texture and color.

Artists such as Jim Dine and Anish Kapoor, however, obliterate the surrounding landscape and focus instead on the single object in nature. Their artistic concerns stretch beyond the mere transcription of nature's beauty. Dine's depiction of a solitary tree in *A Tree that Shatters the Dancing* (1980), as well as Anish Kapoor's vegetal imagery in *Untitled (Red Roots)* (1990) become archetypes used throughout their oeuvres as devices for stylistic experimentation. Ultimately, transcendence of the object depicted occurs through each artist's expressive use of

color. Using deep blues and grays, Dine's tree becomes an object of both confrontation and contemplation. By employing blood-red hues, Kapoor successfully collapses the boundaries between the human and the natural world; his roots resemble veins and capillaries, evoking the spiritual persona of "mother earth."

Other artists included in the exhibition do not represent the landscape but choose instead to physically engage it as part of the artwork. Jean Dubuffet's *Botanical Element: Baptism of Fire* (1959), Richard Long's *Untitled* (1992), and John Cage's *River Rock and Smoke 4/3/90 #5* (1990) all employ nature and natural elements as the medium. Dubuffet's collage composed of densely layered leaves and Long's substitution of river mud for pigment present the tangible elements of the earth, while Cage, in contrast, uses the intangible element of smoke to imprint the ethereal and swirling structures within his drawing. Suffused with natural processes, Cage's watercolor demonstrates the interaction of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

Represented by three grid formations that she entitles *Mountain* (1960), *Red Bird* (1964), and *Wood* (1965), Agnes Martin is an example of an artist who looks beyond the exterior design of the natural object, choosing instead to give objective form to her subjective responses to the natural world. In Georgia O'Keeffe's *Drawing X* (1959) and Ellsworth Kelly's *Pine Branch* (1950), nature has been distilled and decoded to an extent that its underlying structure is revealed. Stripped down to their essence, O'Keeffe's aerial view of a river and Kelly's solitary branch express in their simplicity a stark but precise beauty.



Jim Dine, *A Tree that Shatters the Dancing*, 1980. Synthetic polymer paint, synthetic polymer spray paint, charcoal, and pastel on cut-and-pasted paper, 56% x 50%\* (143.4 x 127.5 cm) (irreg.). Gift of Nancy and Jim Dine in memory of Myron Orloffsky, 1982.

While the drawings of O'Keeffe and Kelly demonstrate the elimination of ornament to the point of purification, Christopher Wool's *Untitled* (1991), Yayoi Kusama's *Untitled* (1952), and Brice Marden's *Rain* (1991) celebrate that aesthetic artifice which composes nature's own patterning. Whether portraying the repetitive design of a creeping vine through the technique of stamping (Wool), the density of a flower's interior through the multiplication of nets and dots (Kusama), or the shifting motion of wind-driven rain through calligraphic line (Marden), each artist explicitly conveys the decorative qualities of the natural world.

Yet another dimension of this exhibition focuses on the interest in nature's microcosm. Tony Smith's and Terry Winters's fascination with biology and botany leads them to describe that part of nature which may only be seen from under a microscope. While Smith presents the building blocks of nature, as exemplified by *Untitled* (1953-55), drawings from Winters's important *Schema* series (1985-86) highlight plant structures, spores, and botanical diagrams. Devoid of idealization, these abstract and ordered botanical specimens evoke nature's eternal cycle of germination, growth, death, and regeneration.

Far from the interior world of nature defined by Smith and Winters, "Earth Artists" represented in the exhibition concern themselves with the larger vista of the natural environment. Interest in "earth art" emerged when artists like Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer ceased to

view the landscape as a natural element reserved for observation, but rather as something to be physically manipulated and rearranged. Their unique sculptural efforts, located within the landscape itself, deny both the traditional boundaries of the museum and the materials of art. Drawings included in this exhibition such as Heizer's *Field Painting No. 2* (1968) and Smithson's *Fossil Quarry Mirror (Outdoor and Indoor Proposal)* (1968) serve as conceptual "blueprints" for their earth sculptures.

Thus, through a variety of guises and modes of depiction, the drawings included in *Elements of the Natural* defy the traditional concept of "landscape" through their unique portrayals of the natural world. By combining both the external and the internal concepts of nature, these artists no longer simply transcribe the natural world, but rather, reinterpret it according to their personal responses; manipulate it for stylistic experimentation; employ it as medium; and even strip it, redesign it, and break it down into its most minute elements. While simultaneously expressing both the simple splendor of nature as well as its universality, the artists represented in *Elements of the Natural* demonstrate a continuing affinity on the part of the modern artist to address nature and absorb her lessons, transforming them into pure artistic visions.

*Elements of the Natural: 1950-1992* was organized by Kathleen Curry and Kristin Helmick-Brunet, Curatorial Assistants, Department of Drawings.

# Elements of the Natural: 1950–1992

## Selections from the Drawings Collection

All works are from the collection of The Museum of Modern Art and are on paper unless otherwise indicated.

### Milton Avery

American, 1885–1965  
*Dune Bushes*. 1958  
Watercolor and gouache on paper mounted on board  
22½ x 30¼" (56.5 x 76.9 cm)  
Purchase, 1982

### Joseph Beuys

German, 1921–1986  
Untitled. 1947 and 1970s  
Pencil on four sheets of paper mounted on painted wood panel  
11½ x 38½" (30.2 x 98.2 cm) (overall)  
Gift of Agnes Gund and Ronald S. Lauder, 1990

### *Dynamis 3*. 1960

Oil, pencil, and ink  
16½ x 11½" (41.5 x 29.5 cm)  
Purchase, 1983

### John Cage

American, 1912–1992  
*River Rock and Smoke 4/13/90 #5*. 1990  
Watercolor on smoked paper  
5½ x 15" (13.3 x 38.1 cm)  
Gift of Sarah-Ann and Werner H. Kramarsky, 1995

### Vija Celmins

American, born Latvia 1939  
Untitled (*Ocean*). 1970  
Pencil  
14½ x 18½" (36 x 48 cm)  
Mrs. Florene M. Schoenborn Fund, 1970

### Christo (Christo Javacheff)

American, born Bulgaria 1935; to United States 1964  
*Packed Tree (Project)*. 1968  
Cut, pasted, and stapled cardboard, polyethylene, cloth, twine, pencil, charcoal, colored pencil, and wash on board  
22½ x 28 x ½" (56.1 x 71.1 x 1.3 cm)  
Gift of the artist, 1968

### Jim Dine

American, born 1935  
*A Tree that Shatters the Dancing*. 1980  
Synthetic polymer paint, synthetic polymer spray paint, charcoal, and pastel on cut-and-pasted paper  
56½ x 50½" (143.4 x 127.5 cm) (irreg.)  
Gift of Nancy and Jim Dine in memory of Myron Orlofsky, 1982



Joan Mitchell. *Untitled*. 1992. Pastel. 29½ x 21½" (75 x 55.2 cm). Purchased with funds given by Mr. and Mrs. Henry R. Kravis, 1996

Six drawings from *Cold Key West Winter*. 1981–83  
Charcoal and lithographic crayon on handmade pink paper  
25½ x 16¼" (57.2 x 41.2 cm) each  
Gift of the artist in memory of Myron Orlofsky, 1983

### Jean Dubuffet

French, 1901–1985  
*Tumultuous Landscape*. 1952  
Pen and ink  
18½ x 23¾" (47.5 x 60.5 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lester Francis Avnet, 1968

### *Botanical Element: Baptism of Fire*. 1959

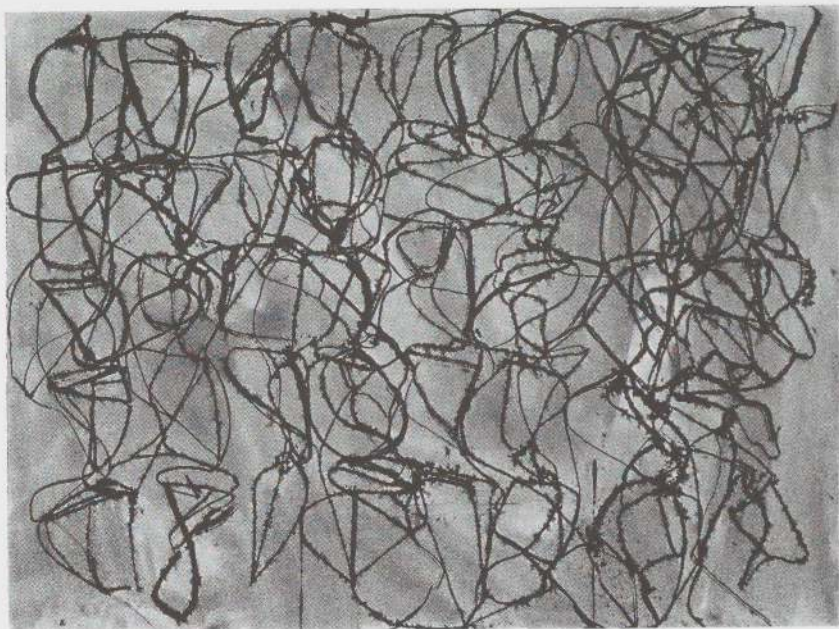
Assemblage of leaves with oil on paper  
21½ x 27½" (54.9 x 68.9 cm)  
The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, 1967

### Helen Frankenthaler

American, born 1928  
*Great Meadows*. 1951  
Watercolor and synthetic polymer paint  
22 x 30½" (56 x 77.4 cm)  
Purchase, 1984

### Hamish Fulton

British, born 1946  
*Mountain Skyline Fourteen Days Walking Fourteen Nights Camping Wind River Range Wyoming*. 1989. 1989  
Pencil and soil  
24¾ x 26¼" (62.8 x 66.8 cm)  
Purchase, 1990



Brice Marden. *Rain*. 1991. Black and colored ink. 25¼ x 34¼" (65.4 x 87.2 cm). Gift of The Edward John Noble Foundation and Ronald S. Lauder, 1992

**Michael Heizer**

American, born 1944  
*Field Painting No. 2*. 1968  
 Ballpoint pen, graphite, wash,  
 and cut-and-pasted paper with  
 typewritten text  
 22½ x 28½" (56.2 x 71.3 cm)  
 Gift of Carol O. Selle, 1980

**Anish Kapoor**

Indian, born 1954  
 Untitled (*Red Leaf*). 1987  
 Gouache and pencil  
 13¾ x 12¼" (35 x 31.1 cm)  
 Gift of Patricia and Morris  
 Orden and an anonymous  
 donor, 1994

Untitled (*Red Roots*). 1990  
 Gouache and ink  
 20 x 19½" (50.9 x 49.5 cm)  
 Gift of Patricia and Morris  
 Orden and an anonymous  
 donor, 1994

**Ellsworth Kelly**

American, born 1923  
*Pine Branch*. 1950  
 Pencil  
 16½ x 20¼ (41.9 x 51.5 cm)  
 Gift of the artist, 1997

**Per Kirkeby**

Danish, born 1938  
 Untitled. 1977  
 Watercolor on parchment paper  
 16¼ x 12" (41.2 x 30.5 cm)  
 Purchased with funds  
 bequeathed by Monawee  
 Allen Richards, 1996

Untitled. 1977  
 Watercolor on parchment  
 paper  
 13¾ x 12½" (35 x 31.8 cm)  
 Purchased with funds given by  
 Agnes Gund, 1996

**Yves Klein**

French, 1928–1962  
*Colored Fire: Blue, Pink*. 1962  
 Dry pigment in synthetic resin  
 with gold paint on asbestos-  
 coated paper, partially charred  
 24½ x 19" (62.1 x 48.3 cm)  
 Gift of the Scaler Foundation  
 and purchase, 1984

**Yayoi Kusama**

Japanese, born 1929  
 Untitled. 1952  
 Pastel and ballpoint pen  
 14¾ x 11½" (37.9 x 29.4 cm)  
 Gift of Patricia and Morris  
 Orden in memory of Michèle  
 Fox, 1996

**Richard Long**

British, born 1945  
 Untitled. 1992  
 Mississippi mud  
 78 x 43" (198.2 x 109.4 cm)  
 Gift of Agnes Gund, 1992

**Leo Manso**

American, 1914-1993  
*Earth 2*. 1962  
 Cut-and-pasted painted fabric  
 and paper on cardboard  
 22 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 19 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (83.8 x 50.7 cm)  
 Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Ronald  
 Neschis, 1963

**Brice Marden**

American, born 1938  
*Rain*. 1991  
 Black and colored ink  
 25 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 34 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (65.4 x 87.2 cm)  
 Gift of The Edward John Noble  
 Foundation and Ronald S.  
 Lauder, 1992

**Agnes Martin**

American, born Canada 1912  
*Mountain*. 1960  
 Pen and ink and pencil  
 9 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (24 x 30.4 cm)  
 Ruth Vollmer Bequest, 1983

*Red Bird*. 1964

Pen and red ink and pencil  
 12 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (31.1 x 30.4 cm)  
 Gift of Mrs. Bliss Parkinson,  
 1966

*Wood*. 1965

Pen and ink and pencil  
 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (27.7 x 27.7 cm)  
 Eugene and Clare Thaw Fund,  
 1964

**Mario Merz**

Italian, born 1925  
*Blossom (Prehistoric Wind  
 from Iced Mountain)*. 1982  
 Oil, spray paint, charcoal, pas-  
 tel, clay, branch, pushpins on  
 burlap on brown paper mount-  
 ed on cardboard  
 52 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 75 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (134.1 x 192 cm)  
 Gift of Charles B. Benenson,  
 1983

**Joan Mitchell**

American, 1926-1992  
 Untitled. 1992  
 Pastel  
 29 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (75 x 55.2 cm)  
 Purchased with funds given by  
 Mr. and Mrs. Henry R. Kravis,  
 1996

**Malcolm Morley**

American, born Great Britain  
 1931  
*Landscape*. 1983  
 Watercolor  
 19 x 24" (48.2 x 60.9 cm)  
 Purchase, 1988

**Georgia O'Keeffe**

American, 1887-1986  
*Drawing X*. 1959  
 Charcoal  
 24 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (63.2 x 47.3 cm)  
 Gift of Abby Aldrich Rocke-  
 feller (by exchange), 1972

**Gakyo Osawa**

Japanese, 1890-1953  
*The Deep Pool*. c. 1953  
 Brush and ink  
 26 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 54 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (68.3 x 138.1 cm)  
 Japanese House Fund, 1954



Terry Winters. *Schema (63)*. 1985-86.  
 Oilstick and graphite. 12 x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (30.4 x  
 21.9 cm). Gift of Lily Auchincloss (by  
 exchange) and of Richard E. Salomon,  
 1988

**Giuseppe Penone**

Italian, born 1947  
 Untitled (No.1). 1981  
 Cut-and-pasted paper,  
 gouache, charcoal, and pen  
 and ink  
 9 x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (22.8 x 23 cm)  
 Gift of the artist, 1983

Untitled (No. 5). 1981  
 Gouache, charcoal, and pen  
 and ink  
 9 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (23 x 23 cm)  
 Gift of the artist, 1983

**Ellen Phelan**

American, born 1943  
*Late Afternoon Across the  
 Lake from Loon Lake: Eleven  
 Drawings*. 1983  
 Gouache  
 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (27.6 x 23.2 cm)  
 Gift of the artist in memory of  
 her father, Thomas Edward  
 Phelan, 1984

*Last Light from Loon Lake:  
 Eleven Drawings*. 1983

Gouache  
 19 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (50.5 x 34.6 cm)  
 Gift of the artist in memory of  
 her father, Thomas Edward  
 Phelan, 1984

**Tony Smith**

American, 1912-1980  
 Untitled. 1953-55  
 Charcoal  
 31 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 39 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (80 x 99.4 cm)  
 Purchased with funds given by  
 Agnes Gund, 1996

**Robert Smithson**

American, 1938-1973  
*Fossil Quarry Mirror (Outdoor  
 and Indoor Project)*. 1968  
 Pencil  
 13 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (34.8 x 27.2 cm)  
 Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd  
 Fund, 1971





Helen Frankenthaler. *Great Meadows*. 1951. Watercolor and synthetic polymer paint. 22 x 30 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (56 x 77.4 cm). Purchase, 1984

**Pat Steir**

American, born 1940  
Untitled (from the series *From the Sea*). 1985  
Graphite, powdered graphite, charcoal, gesso, pencil, and blue ink  
14' 3" x 60 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (434.5 x 153 cm) (irreg.)  
Gift of Charles B. Benenson (by exchange), 1986

**Mark Tobey**

American, 1890–1976  
*Wild Field*. 1959  
Tempera on cardboard  
27 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 28" (68.9 x 71.1 cm)  
The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, 1967

**Terry Winters**

American, born 1949  
*Dark Plants 12*. 1982  
Oil crayon and charcoal  
41 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 29 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (106 x 75.7 cm)  
Gift of Margo Paul Ernst, 1982

*Schema (55)*. 1985–86  
Watercolor, gouache, and graphite  
12 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (30.7 x 21.9 cm)  
Gift of Lily Auchincloss (by exchange) and of Richard E. Salomon, 1988

*Schema (63)*. 1985–86  
Oilstick and graphite  
12 x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (30.4 x 21.9 cm)  
Gift of Lily Auchincloss (by exchange) and of Richard E. Salomon, 1988

*Schema (65)*. 1985–86  
Watercolor and graphite  
12 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (31.1 x 21.9 cm)  
Gift of Lily Auchincloss (by exchange) and of Richard E. Salomon, 1988

**Christopher Wool**

American, born 1955  
Untitled. 1991  
Alkyd paint, stamped  
52 x 40" (132.2 x 101.6 cm)  
Gift of Charles B. Benenson, 1992