

# Sculpture

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**Dirt Works**

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## Why do people who think New York is dirty move to farms?

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### Dirt Works

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**T**here's dirt, and then there's earth. The former arouses fear and loathing—as a recent *Consumer Reports* proclaimed: "Anyone sentenced to viewing a full day of TV will come away convinced that Americans are obsessed with dirt. Commercial after commercial touts stuff to banish dirt...." Earth, on the other hand, is invoked by Save the Earth campaigns and ecologically minded artists to inspire reverence—making the earth a synecdoche for Nature, a spiritual Home and a sacred Mother.

These conflicting associations of soil—between dirt and earth, filth and fertility, primitive and primal—come into play when confronting art made with dirt displayed in a gallery context. Language itself encapsulates this intrinsic equivocality (e.g., "it is soil"/ "it is soiled"). The ambiguities of James Croak's *Dirt Babies* epitomize this: are they earth nymphs or defiled children? Jackie Brookner's corporeal

sacks often suggest torsos as "dirtied linen." Likewise, Sydney Blum's encrusted canvas humanoids recall not Ana Mendieta's bold women of the earth but lank, debilitated slugs. Kim Jones's jockey-short assemblages are splattered with the titular goo of his performance persona, Mud Man, describing defecation. In these artists' hands, soil refers to ordure rather than nature, filth rather than earth. Yet used in figurative work, the dirt transcends allusions to excrement to evoke the ordeals of *human* nature.

Writing about anal character traits, Sigmund Freud inserted into his German text an English aphorism by Lord Chesterfield: "Dirt is matter in the wrong place."<sup>1</sup> Context is fundamental: in the garden soil is earth; on the kitchen floor it's dirt.<sup>2</sup> Recent art made out of soil is doubly dirty: it is made out of a cheap and nonart material, dirt, and—seen against a pristine gallery—it seems an aggressive intrusion: "in the wrong place." All genuinely new art is transgressive; this kind inverts the breaches of good taste by its immediate predecessors prominent in the galleries, such as Jeff Koons, who showcased multiple brand-new vacuum cleaners and enlarged glossy kitsch figurines to ostentatious scale. Along with other commodity fetishists, he was cleaning up the art world after the puerile excrescences of late Neo-Expressionism in the mid-1980s.

Now a few years into the international economic recession (begun during the fading dominance of cynical Neo-Popism), the current dirt workers have turned the idea of art as merchandise on its head. Not surprisingly, their work is associated with the other end of the body, what the Victorians euphemistically called "night soil."<sup>3</sup>

The Western veneration for museums and formal galleries makes us approach them as temples of culture, and as anthropologist Mary Douglas noted in *Purity and Danger*, "for us sacred things and places are to be protected from defilement. Holiness and impurity are at opposite ends.... Yet it is supposed to be a mark of primitive religion to make no clear distinction between sanctity and uncleanness."<sup>4</sup> It's the return of the Expressionist spirit, which always feels emotionally akin to "the primitive" that hauls dirt into the white cube.

The icon of dirt "in the wrong place" is Walter DeMaria's *New York Earth Room*, in which, since 1977, a dark, regularly moistened earth and soil mixture has filled (up to a level of 21 inches) the former gallery space at 141 Wooster Street. (The DIA Foundation

**Kim Jones, *Men's Room*, 1991. Underwear and mixed media.**





**Jackie Brookner,  
*Heyoka*, 1992.  
Rubber and earth,  
96½ x 27½ x  
50¼ in.**



maintains it.) Here the formlessness of the dirt pile dominates the function of the rigid white architecture; nature overpowers culture. The *Earth Room* also evokes a perverse pleasure in dominating a space with one's primal product, shit. The SoHo piece is DeMaria's third version; the first *Gallery Earth Room, Munich* (1968) was itself a rejection of the contemporaneously dominant, cool Pop Art and rigorously contained Minimalism (just as the current dirt works renounce Neo-Geo's detached conceptualism). The original room represented an approach to working with organic and ephemeral materials in remote natural environments as well as urban studios, an approach that Germano Celant labeled *Arte Povera* for his 1969 documentary book.

Like a mirror to our time, the current "povera" impulse reflects the current conjunction of a meager economy, social revulsion against '80s excesses and disdain

for art glitz. This is not to say that artists didn't show dirt in the '80s: the inclusion of Meg Webster's *Earth Stage* (1989) in the Whitney Biennial that year certified her centrality. Yet Webster's classicizing modus operandi subverted organic slackness by pressing mounds of earth, salt or moss into tidy elemental geometries, thus imposing architectural order on natural amorphousness. Petah Coyne's gargantuan pendulous clods, sometimes bound by rope or wire, are more eccentric, but they were also widely shown over the last decade. Coyne's frightful bulbous growths strongly evoke Nature, albeit Nature gone hauntingly awry. The referential density of this work—from the botanical to the biological—displays a substantial, singular vision.<sup>5</sup>

In the past few years artists have increasingly worked with detritus—from urban trash to destroyed ecosystems—in situations ranging from gallery installations

to institutionally funded projects revitalizing environmental damage. Like the now omnipresent homeless scavengers, they look *down* for aesthetic sustenance, into the garbage can, onto the imperiled earth.

Emphasizing how artist David Hammons "has always chosen the dirtiest materials available," Tom Finkelppearl recognized the ideological implications of this artistic practice: "Hammons's use of dirty materials relates directly to the social and economic status of dirt, a cheap substance, and to his own ability to control his means of production, like the dirt farmer."<sup>6</sup> Yet Hammons himself has provocatively associated his fondness for the rough, worn, and discarded to *bodily* processes: "I think I spend 85 percent of my time on the streets.... So, when I go to the studio I expect to regurgitate these experiences.... All of the things I see socially—the social conditions of racism—come out like a sweat."<sup>7</sup>



narrow opening are coils of soil, referring either to viscera—the insides that transform food into filthy feces—or to sexuality as something dirty, the dangerous earthiness encountered beneath females' skirts.

Brookner is a feminist artist who has played on both sides of the earth-dirt road. For Earth Day 1991 she worked with students at Kingsborough Community College, Brooklyn, to make a huge foot (measuring 13 x 8 x 4 feet) out of dirt and water. A stream of asphalt flowed down the middle of it, and on its bed of red wax and iron oxide students drew the endangered species of New York State. She has made several foot pieces out of dirt to explore our relation to the earth "under our feet."

Yet Brookner's strongest sculptures more elliptically explore the terrain of the body. In *Heyoka* (1992) two overarching rubber pipes disappear into a fleshy black tube leaning against the wall. Emerging out of its dark opening at the floor is a big, tumescent tongue—of dirt. The viewer vacillates between being repulsed and enticed: the tongue is gross—but amusingly so. Its sexualized aggressiveness suggests a lewd cartoon, while its deep cleft resembles a buttocks and its bulging soil conjures feces. Anatomy has been turned upside down in this work: spindly "legs" in the air, tongue eating dirt. Brookner's creative handling of few materials could be a portrait of the mythological American Indian trickster for whom it is named, Heyoka, a character who deliberately reverses conventional order as a release from taboos. But the source of this sculpture's punch is the *experience* it evokes—of how sexual desire can turn one topsy-turvy, or where passion is concerned, "this end up" is a matter of preference.

Sydney Blum's figurelike sculptures of the past few years, saturated with a dirt-gel mixture, also strongly reference the body as a manifestation of the psyche. Made from large canvas bags the artist sews herself, the pieces are suspended from the ceiling by a rope. The draped forms dangle limply while the weight of the caked on earth prevents them from floating freely. Individually, the encrusted anatomical shapes compellingly exude despondent moods; however, when displayed together, such as in the "Nestbag Series," shown at New York's Sculpture Center in 1990, the works suggest a gang of morose inmates.

James Croak has been experimenting with the possibilities of casting dirt extensively since the mid-'80s, after inventing his soil-resin mixture as an inexpensive substitute for bronze. In contrast to that more neutral material, soil acquires

its own specific associations. Playing with and against them, Croak has astutely explored several thematic inversions. In the wall piece *Wing* (1989) a graceful feathered span associated with air and elevation is cast in material from the earth and ground, suggesting transcendence dirtied, weighted down, grounded. Recently, he's been casting old wood frame windows to produce austere architectural grids. Akin to the Belgian surrealist René Magritte's window-landscape reversals, these pieces are more opaque than transparent. Sunlight is obscured, and the works present a view of nature that has been closed by one of its own elements, soil.

Croak's *Dirt Man With Fish* (1986) contains another powerful juxtaposition to the connotations of dirt. In ancient Near Eastern religious symbolism, the fish represents a primal sacred being; it lives in the water, our first Magna Mater, but serves as food for those who live on land. In early Christian belief the fish became a symbol of Jesus. Psychologically, the fish is associated with the milieu symbolizing the unconscious, water, and fishes' plentiful eggs

demonstrate the unconscious's potential fecundity. Croak's *Dirt Man*, in topcoat and hat, is a businessman made of dirt; walking stooped and with a cane, he seems downtrodden, weak. Oblivious to the school of glimmering turquoise fish that moves through his body, this dejected fellow is unaware of the potentialities of the spiritual realm, or alternatively, of his unconscious.

Paradox is most poignant in Croak's "Dirt Baby" series of 1988–91. While babies do soil themselves, their attentive parents quickly change and powder them. In a *Dirt Baby*—a cast doll that has been finely detailed—all of a baby's connotations of purity, innocence and promise are contradicted by dirt's associations with filth, defilement and refuse. Croak's numerous dirt offspring suggest an identification with an emotionally battered child; what has been refused here, so to speak, is the hopefulness that newborns inspire. This concern with defiled childhood partakes of a broader impulse in the art world, as several baby boom-generation artists (sculptors Jeff Koons, Mike Kelley and Robert Gober and

Sydney Blum,  
*Reclining Bag-Green*,  
1989–90. Canvas, gel,  
cement and pigment,  
60 x 75 x 29 in.





