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## The Artist Interview: Nancy Macko

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Nancy Macko, Still #85, Bee Stories, 2006,  
digital video, 8:11 min. Image courtesy of the  
artist.

In this in-depth interview, noted multimedia artist and professor [Nancy Macko](#) talks to Emily Waldorf about her ongoing HIVE Universe project and current group show, “[Gaia and Global Warming: Women Artists Champion Nature](#),” at the Center for the Arts in Jackson Hole. Ms. Macko also touches on eco-feminism, how she balances teaching and creating, working on Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*, and her study of ancient matriarchal cultures.

### **EW: How did you get started as an artist?**

NM: When I was in high school one of the art teachers noticed my work and displayed it. It wasn’t much to speak of, it was good from a design perspective, but that interest was enough for me to begin exploring my inner world. It took years of study in several colleges before I felt ready for the commitment that graduate school represented. Once that process began, I knew that I was on the path that was right for me...practicing art and teaching. I credit my studio art professors in those

undergraduate school programs with helping me focus and get on course.



Nancy Macko, Detail 05, *Honey Teachings*, 2009-10, archival digital print, 11.5 inches in diameter. Image courtesy of the artist.

**EW: You work with video installation, traditional and digital prints, and mixed media on wood panel to create a unique visual language. How did the various mediums that you use evolve over time?**

NM: My concentration in graduate school at UC Berkeley was painting and printmaking. I worked mostly on paper and studied monotyping with Sylvia Lark. Working in mixed-media on paper was a real draw for me. When I began to teach at Scripps College in the late eighties, it was to teach drawing and printmaking. Because of the connection between graphics and printmaking, I was invited to create a “computer graphics” program, which I started in 1990 and continue to direct. This was my first foray into working digitally and I loved it. I started to use Photoshop as soon as it came on the market in the early 90’s and have incorporated it into my work since then. My first major mixed media piece, *The Honeycomb Wall*, 1993-4, incorporated traditional printmaking with collage, sculpture and layered digital images that were printed as cibachrome photographs. These were affixed to hexagonally-shaped wood panels. The piece was comprised of almost 100 panels and installed to create the effect of a honeycomb.

The use of video entered my work later and again it was a result of being exposed to new media and new software. In 1996 I started videotaping events I observed or created with an emphasis on the idea of the bee priestess. After 12 years I decided I had the information I needed to produce my first video piece, *Lore of the Bee Priestess*, which I made at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada during my last sabbatical in 2004. *Bee Stories*, 2006 followed that. I continue to gather footage and record material both visually and aurally. I am currently working on a piece that is inspired by my mother’s aging and the process of short-term memory loss or dementia that I will use in conjunction with original footage from 1944 and a new version of *The Honeycomb Wall* called *Honey Teachings* that

looks at the current disappearance of the bees and what that foretells. *Honey Teachings* will be exhibited at The Cheese Factory in Petaluma, CA in June.

**EW: Would you describe yourself as an eco-feminist, and if so, how does that translate into your work?**

NM: I have always worked from a feminist point of view starting in graduate school. At that time (1979) a group of female grad students collaborated on an installation we called *Housewife Blitz*, that explored the expectations of domestic life for women with a career as a woman artist. During this time, I also had the opportunity to work on Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, which had a profound impact on me. I don't think feminism really became evident in my work until I began the work about the bees. I have no problem identifying as an eco-feminist as I believe in the Earth as a sacred entity, as Gaia, and want us all to do everything in our power to save and protect our home. If this means dismantling the current hierarchical structures that are in place in order to do so, then we need to find a way to do that. It becomes very sensitive when those structures also represent age-old belief systems of religions, governance, and cultures.



Nancy Macko, Still #08, Lore of the Bee Priestess, 2004, digital video, 13:43 min. Image courtesy of the artist.

**EW: How did you conceive the Hive Universe project? Please tell us about Bee Priestess culture.**

NM: In the early 90's, Savina Teubal wrote a wonderful text called *Hagar, Lost Desert Matriarch*. In that text she wrote about the life of the priestesses and identified bee priestesses. I was drawn to this because she described a woman-centered world inhabited by women who honored the goddess and were self-sufficient unto themselves, which reminded me of contemporary lesbians to some degree. Autonomous, controlling their reproduction and setting their own terms—it also resembled life in the Hive. I began to research honeybees, hexagons, the chemistry of honey, the geometry of the hexagon, and ancient matriarchal cultures. After several years of reading and thinking, I began to produce work that reflected a possible culture, a mythology, of bee priestesses. Over time—15 plus years—this work evolved to form the Hive Universe.



Nancy Macko, Detail 01, Honey Teachings, 2009-10, archival digital print, 11.5 inches in diameter. Image courtesy of the artist.

**EW: What can ancient matriarchal cultures reveal about the female condition in the 21st century?**

NM: It was my contention that an ancient culture, like an ancient constellation, could be discovered in what we would identify as the future, and that the ways of living of that time, the morals or laws of that ancient time would have resonance with our world today and could help us re-balance our world in order to save the Earth and create peace on Earth. In fact it is impossible to know anything about these earlier cultures because they occurred before written history began. There are many artifacts that remain from such cultures, but that is not enough to be able to ascertain with any certitude what life was really like.

In 1996, I traveled to Eastern Europe to research certain cultures that Marija Gimbutas' referenced in her book, *Language of the Goddess*. The culture I was able to learn about the most was the Cucuteni, 5000-3500 BC. They were omnipresent in much of Romania. A partly nomadic, partly domestic culture it is impossible to know for sure if they were matriarchal. The first matriarchal culture we can actually identify is the Minoans because there is enough evidence and documentation about them to be able to understand their culture as such. In their culture there was great equality between men and women. Women were involved in economics, trade and other areas considered more public than private. Young females and males participated in what eventually became the early olympics although by the time the Greeks adopted them, it was only young males that participated.

I am not sure ancient matriarchal cultures reveal anything about the female condition in the 21st century but perhaps they can remind us that it is not too late to revere the Earth and every living thing on it.



Nancy Macko, *The Honeycomb Wall*, 1993-94, mixed media, 9 X 20' X 2", each panel 11.5 inches in diameter. Installed at The Center for the Arts, Jackson Hole, WY, 2009. Image courtesy of the artist.

**EW: Do you think there is a dialogue between your work and the other artists work in the current show, "[Gaia and Global Warming: Women Artists Champion Nature](#)," in Jackson Hole?**

NM: [The Gaia show](#) is the first show in which my work was understood from an eco-feminist perspective and I have Lowery Sims to thank for that. I do think there is a dialogue between my work and the other artists in that each of us is responding to a warning call or more like an incessant alarm to wake up! I love this show and the brilliance in putting our work together.

**EW: Do you prefer to work privately or in a shared studio space? Do you plan your projects carefully in advance or experience more spontaneous bursts of creative energy?**

NM: I have had a private studio ever since graduate school for over 25 years. My partner has a studio next door to mine. She is probably the only person who has the closest access to my work while it is in progress. I am usually working on several projects at a time each of which has it's own time frame. They are each planned out to some degree but the actual work is created spontaneously at the time that I make it. Because I teach fulltime from Sept –June, I create/produce most of my work during the summer. During the academic year, I do research, apply for grants and arrange exhibitions of the work. I can often get some actual work produced over winter break. Sabbatical years are very productive times for me as I can work on several projects at once and see them to completion. The most recent project I just finished was started on my 2003-04 sabbatical. A suite of etchings and lithographs begun in the spring of 2004, were completed this past spring, 2009. During that time I worked with master printer Mark Mahaffey of Mahaffey Fine Art in Portland to produce five separate suites of prints.

**EW: Do you have any advice for art majors?**

NM: Follow your heart...the rest will meet you there.

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