

DETAILS:

Artist Talk followed by Kohl Gallery viewing:

Thursday, February 10, 6pm

Talk in Tawes Theatre in Gibson Center for the Arts

Kohl Gallery walk-in hours:

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday 1:30-5pm

Wednesday 4:00-7:00pm

Saturday 12-3pm

*MASKS REQUIRED Indoors

Outdoor installation @ SG Hall accessible 24/7

contact:

Gallery Director, Tara Gladden

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www.washcoll.edu/about/campus/kohl-gallery

PRY is made possible in part with funding from the Maryland State Arts Council and the Kent Cultural Alliance, and is a collaboration between Washington College's Center for Environment and Society, River and Field Campus, and Kohl Gallery.



PRY

Stephanie Garon



January 25 - March 4, 2022

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION:

“Stephanie Garon’s artwork investigates the vulnerability of nature to humanity. The juxtaposition of natural objects against industrial materials exposes dichotomies of formality/fragility and permanence/impermanence. Natural materials, sourced by hand locally, convey themes of claim, women’s labor, and time.” Her ecologically motivated interventions elucidate questions related to our human relationship with the natural world in the age of the Anthropocene.¹

For *PRY*, Garon conducted site-specific research and worked with Director of Washington College’s River and Field campus, Michael Hardesty to learn about various invasive species we are struggling with in our area. She chose to focus on the non-native, invasive plant species *Phragmites australis* as both subject and material. “Non-native *Phragmites australis* is a perennial, aggressive wetland grass that outcompetes native plants and displaces native animals” and critical habitat.² They have a rapidly spreading rhizomatic root and as a result are very difficult to control and remove. Well known in Atlantic coastal communities, they are an ever-growing threat to the health of our natural ecosystems. Because of their rhizomatic root system, the best long-term extraction method is the labor-intensive process of digging (or *prying*) them out of the ground from the root.

For the past year, Garon has been “prying” *Phragmites australis* out of the ground along the Chester Riverbank at both the River and Field Campus and Semans-Griswold Environmental Hall. The *PRY* exhibition encompasses two different locations: inside Kohl Gallery and outside the Semans-Griswold Environmental Hall. The two installations reflect one another and are designed in a circle to mirror irrigation systems on local land parcels. Their approximate size of 14’x14’ is the cumulative area of *Phragmites australis* removed over the course of the year, illustrating the amount of labor that went into the project for such a small result. The poetic title of the exhibition references humanity’s interruption of nature with climate change, and Garon’s laborious process acts as a profound reminder of how the burden of the environmental crisis falls disproportionately on the shoulders of women worldwide.

The indoor location at Kohl Gallery holds the physical manifestation of *Phragmites australis* in a beautiful yet impossible arrangement where plumes endeavor to breach the gallery ceiling and severed roots hover above the ground in clear view. This material interpretation functions as a depository of sense memory offering an immersive view into Garon’s intimate process and connection to the plant. Encapsulating the themes of claim, women’s labor, and time ever present in Garon’s overarching oeuvre, it invites the viewer into a contemplative simulated environment. As it discloses the futility of the extraction process, it celebrates the plant’s complex beauty. Video and sound captured during Garon’s fieldwork coalesce with the material installation further sculpting the visceral experience.

¹ Artist Statement, <http://www.garonstudio.com/about.html>, January 12, 2022

² *PHRAGMITES: Questions and Answers - FWS*, https://www.fws.gov/gomcp/pdfs/phragmitesqa_factsheet.pdf, October 1, 2021.

The outdoor location along the Chester River by Semans-Griswold Environmental Hall features raw steel. The steel both alludes to the replacement of nature with industry, and acts as a metaphorical phantom representation of the plant. It is introduced into the landscape in an incisive act that speaks to the human interruption of nature. As these delicate reeds of steel integrate into the landscape, they sway flexibly with the elements, offering a distinct reminder of humanity’s hubris and nature’s fragile intractability. Their well-adjusted, yet inorganic presence exposes contradictions present in our relationship to the natural world, challenging us to think more critically about our actions.

PRY is the third and last in a year-long series initiated by Kohl Gallery to present art by artists working at the intersection of environmental and ecological issues. This exhibition is a collaboration between Washington College’s Center for Environment and Society, River and Field Campus, and Kohl Gallery.

While these two installations are the culmination and have been a polestar for the project, they do not represent the whole of the work. In addition to Garon’s ongoing research and fieldwork, a series of educational, awareness-building workshops accompanied the project and engaged the Washington College and greater Kent County communities. These workshops introduced participants to the project and *Phragmites australis* from scientific, ecological, and visual perspectives. Participants also aided in the removal of *Phragmites australis* in the field and their extractions are included in the exhibition.



ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Stephanie Garon received dual science degrees from Cornell University, then attended Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). Her environmental art has been exhibited internationally in London, Colombia, South Korea, as well as across the United States. Her writing, a critical aspect of her artistic process, has been published in international literary journals and her chapbook, *ACREAGE*, was published by Akinoga Press in 2021. She is a Hamiltonian Gallery Fellow, a National Park Service Artist-in-Residence in the Everglades, and recipient of a Puffin Foundation Environmental Art grant.