

It's Oh So Quiet

by Erin Gordon

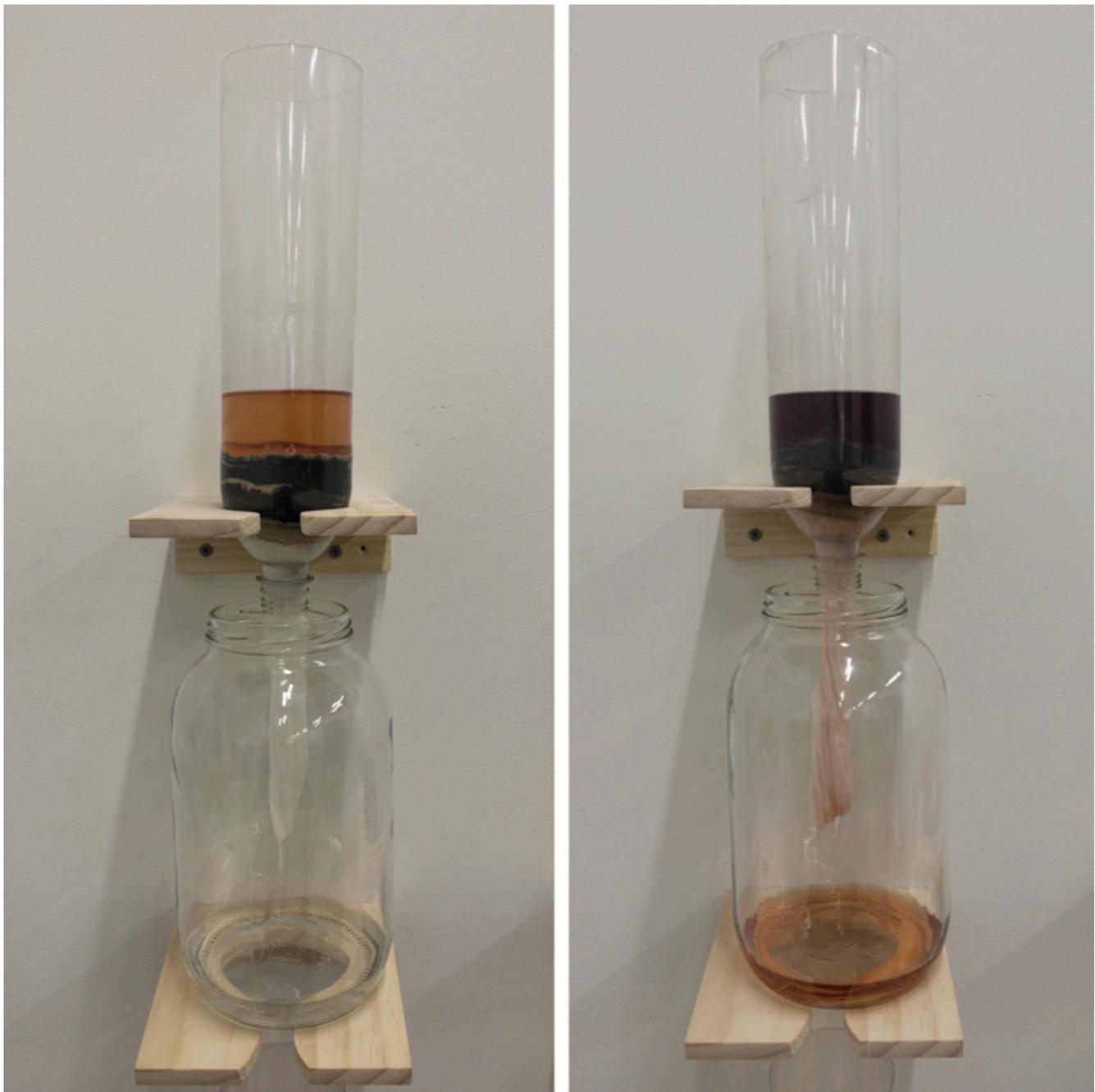
an essay for *COM' A TERRA QUIETE IN FOCO VIVO*

a solo exhibition by Gioj de Marco

I remember the faint smell of a campfire. Oddly comforting, yet visually ominous and threatening. The sky, still that familiar California blue, was hazy with tinges of orange and red. That is living in Southern California during the wildfires, protected from the actual devastation on the news without actually experiencing it up-close. In 2018, the Camp Fire swallowed up Paradise, California, leaving thousands without shelter, devoid of their precious possessions and stability.¹ Heidegger once remarked, "Is not this merging of everything into the distanceless more unearthly than everything bursting apart?"² The fire was communicated to us from a technological distance, letting us know that climate change is ever-present while allowing us to retreat back into our own lives; it does not affect us until it does.

There is the obvious irony of a town called Paradise being so devastated by wildfire that many homes (including human, vegetal, and animal) were left in ashes. Juxtaposed against the imagination's wanderings around California, assumptions of sunshine, palm trees, a mild year-round temperature, this event was devastating despite being one of many wildfires to occur in past years. This is where Los Angeles-based artist Gioj De Marco carefully took residue from Paradise in the form of charcoal; charcoal, as a simultaneous remnant of both transformation and destruction, serves as the crux that activates her past projects and present installation at NAPOLEON.

COM' A TERRA QUIETE IN FOCO VIVO, or "how quiet on the ground in live fire," is De Marco's meditation on inevitable becoming by way of evolution.³ It is not a denial on the utter tragedy of wildfires and their presence as a fragment of the devastation of climate change; rather, it is a literal interpretation of its lingering silence in the midst of unexpected violence. In her most recent series of work, *Miracle Reversal* (2020), she takes charcoal as a kind of catalyst between two substances, wine and water, thus exploring the irreversibility what appears to be human achievement (e.g. fracking, mining, oil drilling) as it continues to impact the environment.



Gioj de Marco: *Miracle Reversal- Wine into Water*, 2020.

Wine is the result of a laborious process that involves harvesting, crushing, fermenting, and aging grapes; the end product is a commercial staple of gatherings (as simple as a family dinner or Communion). By working from this idea of wine transforming into water, De Marco visually reverses the irreversible. It is a curious, yet playful, experiment that occurs slowly and carefully over a matter of days. As an integral element of her work, vessels carry the literal weight of this project; they hold, they carry, they transform, they shape. In a sense, they are as

important as the liquid inside, as it is shaped and guided into its final resting place—a place where it is conceptually different from the wine it once was. Liquid slowly trickles through gravity filters constructed from the Paradise charcoal. They are a thing, *the* thing, that carries the visual and conceptual weight of her project. They turn the absolutes of wine and water to an inexplicable in-betweenness.

Rather than focusing on the act of turning water into wine as explicit religious symbolism, De Marco is more interested in the inevitability of the events that culminated in the Paradise wildfire. The term Anthropocene immediately conjures up thoughts of industrialization and progress; the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s ushered in a domino-effect of innovations that improved the human quality of life for better or, in some instances, for worse. The scholar McKenzie Wark describes the Anthropocene as “a series of metabolic rifts, where one molecule after another is extracted by labor and technique to make things for humans, but the waste products don’t return so that the cycle can renew itself. The soils deplete, the seas recede, the climate alters, the gyre widens: a world on fire.”⁴ In this epoch, nothing is wholly renewable, and no once-fossilized resource is regenerated by way of science. By turning wine back into water with the introduction of found charcoal, De Marco’s gesture is poetic in a myriad of ways, indicative of an attempt to move forward from what is seemingly irreversible.

Charcoal is a strange kind of residue, particularly due to its place in health and wellness movements as of late. Products with activated charcoal are easy to find and usually ingestible—in toothpaste, in pastries, in canned drinks, in our water filters. It is a result of carbon, heat, and water, and in the case of the charcoal gathered from Paradise, all of these elements responded to each other again and again during the ongoing fires. Carbon is the essence of life on our planet, constantly reacting and responding to the elements in ways that we do not actively realize. It is present everywhere and in everything; as the backbone of nearly all molecules required for life, it is inescapable. Wark speaks to this moment as being the “Carbon Liberation Front,” since it has been liberated from its prehistoric confines by the human desire for progress and consumption.⁵ In Paradise, the heat from the fires removed the water from every possible material it touched, resulting in the inky residue we know as charcoal. It is everywhere, intangible, until we physically see it dusted upon and within rubble.

De Marco’s *Paradise* (2019) is a Monopoly house made of charcoal. At ten times the size of the little colorful piece that typically sits upon the game board, it is somehow even more fragile and more delicate than its original precursor. As wine moves through the filter, color agents adhere to the charcoal filter, gradually causing the wine to become more and more translucent. In this instance, as a prelude to *Miracle Reversal*, the inky black charcoal engulfs the idea of the Monopoly house in entirety, in turn magnifying the environmental ruin that took place where the charcoal was found.



Gioj de Marco: *Paradise*, 2019.

De Marco herself activates it in a different way, employing it as the agent through which wine passes into a different visual state. Now, charcoal, taken from a place named Paradise, is formed into filters that sit snugly inside their glass vessels. And carbon, which is everywhere, is the material through which we can see wine drip slowly into a future as what is seemingly water. It is a living installation in that it will gradually move towards a state with the visual similarity of water. Rather than working in absolutes (Is it wine? Is it water?), being in the gallery space with the installation as wine drips towards the vessel below makes De Marco's

work most like a time-based work, or a work not in stasis. Her use of mason jars to actively track the progression of wine to water plays into the idea of a time-based work full of readymades, with the most unavoidable yet declarative readymade of all: transformed carbon itself.

All of this—the fires, the charcoal, the water, the wine—is the quiet process that culminated in *COM' A TERRA QUIETE IN FOCO VIVO*, which is resolutely ever-evolving and in-progress. It is a series of works that inherently feels in situ from the moment De Marco installs them within the gallery space; they progress from charcoal to wine to water in the gallery, which asks us to actively experience them. The act of seeing these mounted works provokes an inescapable meditation on our environment, how we shape it, and how we learn from it. Teen activist Greta Thunberg, in her speech at the United Nation Headquarters, declared, “The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.”⁶ De Marco’s gesture at active change, however small it may seem, carefully meditates on this sentiment whether we like it or not.

Footnotes

1. The name “Camp Fire” refers to the fire’s location along Camp Creek Road in Paradise, California; see Colleen Haggerty, “The Survivors,” last modified October 23, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/10/16/20908291/camp-fire-wildfire-california-paradise-survivors>.
2. Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (1971), 164.
3. This phrase is found in Dante’s *Paradiso*, the third installment of his *Divina Commedia*.
4. McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2015), iBooks.
5. Ibid.
6. NPR Staff, “Transcript: Greta Thunberg’s Speech At The U.N. Climate Action Summit,” last modified September 23, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>.

Erin Gordon is a writer and curator based in Philadelphia. She received her MFA in Critical and Curatorial Studies at the University of California, Irvine in 2018, where her research focused on the intersections between new media art, video games, affect theory, and time-based media. She enjoys postmodern film, reality television, and memes in her spare time.