

Fractal

Nature

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A.I.R.

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The whole is a mirror of its parts. Fractals are unparalleled sublime structures produced by nature. They hide in plain sight all around us. They are difficult to precisely define, though fractals are generally geometric patterns in which every smaller part of the structure resembles the whole. The term comes from the Latin word *fractus* meaning “broken” or “irregular,” and alludes to how these random or chaotic natural phenomena break down and patch back together across various scales. Fractals appear in crystal growth, fluid turbulence, the biodiversity of a forest, and galaxy formation.

Most natural objects are composed of many different types of fractals woven into each other, each with parts containing successive fractal dimensions. Humans are fractal: our lungs, our circulatory systems, our brains are much like a forest of trees. The 2021 A.I.R. National Members exhibition’s title, *Fractal Nature*, departs from activist and Black feminist scholar adrienne maree brown’s idea that fractal nature is central to humans’ ability to organize, collectivize, and build a more equitable future. In a recent lecture, brown emphasized that the human experience, the sum of all our parts, “is made up of all these small parts and small patterns.” She poses the question: “How do we set small patterns that can grow into massive patterns of change?”¹ For brown, by practicing and repeating new patterns, however infinitely small they may seem, we have the power to incite the changes we seek and repair the injustices of our past. In this essay, I discuss the exhibition as a fractal occurrence, a platform for dialogue and exchange which makes visible small gestures that when grouped together articulate a different future.

Adaptability is fundamental to the nature of fractals. Adaptation produces dynamic encounters that evolve and

¹ adrienne maree brown, “Identity, Community, Belonging,” 2021 Distinguished Lecturer Series, The Institute for Humanities Research, Arizona State University, March 25, 2021, <<https://ihr.asu.edu/distinguished-lecturer/adrienne-maree-brown>>.

reconfigure an individual organism or species, making it better suited to its environment. In a fractal relationship, bumpy and organic, multiple individuals across difference come together to form a whole—they adapt. How might humans build relationships with one another that withstand difference and deepen our ability to move through change together? How might collectively coming together create a space of healing and belonging? Turning to nature as a guide, evolution in the Everglades National Park has allowed nearly 400 species of fauna and over 1,300 species of flora to live alongside each other, having adapted to the environmental damage of human intrusion and sea-level rise. This biodiverse wetland ecosystem is home to alligators, bromeliads, birds, deer, and squishy organisms such as periphyton. A plurality of species has adapted and thrived despite climate change's ecological precarious conditions.

Fractal Nature is about the group, not the individual. During the 1970s and 1980s, the feminist art movement in New York City was based on the belief that total gender parity in gallery and museum exhibitions, coupled with a feminized aesthetic standard, could be achieved via an oppositional women's practice². The movements' founders came together and contended that this would revolutionize the existing masculinist hegemonic institutional structure.

In 1972, a collective of women artists, including Howardena Pindell, Nancy Spero, and Barbara Zucker, founded the Artists in Residence Gallery (A.I.R.), an artist-run cooperative dedicated to feminist practices and showing the work of its members. The collective's first press release defined its intended demographic as women artists who "have been working for a number of years, some in total isolation, others exhibiting extensively." The mission of

A.I.R.'s founding members was to collectively organize, not only to support themselves as artists, but to change the perception of women artists altogether. Most importantly, A.I.R. sought to bring together a plurality of voices and aesthetic practices. These aims were expanded outside of the New York City area when A.I.R. initiated its National Artists Program.

The A.I.R. National Artists Program began with an exhibition in 1981, nine years after the gallery was established, and became a vehicle to connect artists across the U.S. This program proved to be fundamental to A.I.R.'s mission as it created a space of belonging that fosters connections and builds alliances with artists outside NYC. In effect, the National Artists Program paved a pathway for artists to turn collective intelligence towards collaborative action. The program was designed to build a network of feminist activities by bringing together A.I.R.'s New York Artist Members and its National Members. In this case, A.I.R.'s National Members exhibition provides the space to develop deeper connections by actively working together to organize and present artworks representing women artists from San Francisco, CA, to Tampa, FL.

For the past forty years, the National Members have organized collectively both at A.I.R. Gallery and in their own cities. By organizing exhibitions affiliated with A.I.R. in their respective cities, the National Members have activated the exhibition as a fractal site where they collectively gather, exchange ideas, and create community. These exhibitions act as fractal occurrences which articulate the effects of curiosity, adaptability, and hope. They are the small but infinitely powerful gestures which contain the ability to change and be changed by

² Juli Carson, "On Discourse as Monument: Institutional Spaces and Feminist Problematics," in *Alternative art, New York, 1965-1985: a cultural politics book for the Social Text Collective*. ed., Julie Ault (New York: Drawing Center, 2002), 133.

the encounters the artists have with each other. These opportunities for exchange make visible the small actions that when scaled begin to shape a vision of an alternate future.

Fractal Nature brings together the artwork of nineteen artists who make up the historic A.I.R. National Artists Program. The exhibition represents the broad and diverse concerns that each artist is engaged with at the moment. Some artworks refer to the vulnerability of the body, violence against the mind, and social and gender expectations. Others call upon the quotidian moments, intimate and ordinary, the sacred and geometric forces within nature, and the celebratory, despite the difficulties life may bring. The National Members' artworks reflect individual fractal patterns that when experienced unified within the gallery reveal a multiplicity of profoundly simple, yet powerful, gestures and interactions.

This publication presents the smaller fragments which make up the whole—a group of women working together to further feminist discourses within art. It is evidence of our ability to organize and collectivize with the hope that our gestures contribute to patterns of change.

Sound Words — I am an immigrant, 2021.
Paper cut-outs on paper,
42 x 48 inches.

POW! I AM AN IMMIGRANT! BOOM! proudly exclaims the work of artist Joo Yeon Woo, who uses her cultural experience of being an immigrant in the U.S. to explore the fluidity of identity, diaspora, boundaries, sense of place, and placelessness in her art. In her most recent project *Sound Works*, a series of collages, cut-outs, and sumi ink drawings, Woo interweaves onomatopoeia words, interjections, and protest signs made by immigrants to simultaneously confront her own vulnerability and empower herself through language. The artist transforms violent moments of cultural difference, activating immigrants' linguistic and cultural barriers, into fresh and sensational narratives. Joo Yeon Woo lives in Tampa, Florida, and was a National Member between 2012–2018 and 2020 to the present.

