



ARTISTS

Graveyard Shift: At Storied Brooklyn Cemetery, Janine Antoni Stages Artwork Amid 560,000 Bodies

BY *Claire Selvin* POSTED 09/26/19 12:30 PM

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Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn.
MARY ALTAFFER/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

“Bones have been appearing in my work for the past few years, so the catacombs were the perfect place for me to come back to my love of the body and its bony armature,” Janine Antoni told *ARTnews* in a recent interview, discussing a new project she is staging in a New York

cemetery. “The vaults hold memories for the living, as our bodies do.”

The catacombs and vaults are part of Green-Wood Cemetery, a historic 478-acre home in Brooklyn for thousands of statues, mausoleums, large-scale monuments, and tombstones—and, as of this past weekend, Antoni’s *I am fertile ground*, a site-specific installation comprising small photographs in gilded frames modeled like human bones that are scattered throughout a dark underground space illuminated by skylights. Open on weekends in catacombs dating back to the mid-19th century and typically closed to the public, the work—which resides amidst the final resting places of some 560,000 bodies, including those of luminaries like artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and composer Leonard Bernstein—remains on view through November 17.

The images in Antoni’s pieces depict human bodies engaged in prayer, dance, and other gestures, and they are meant to function as odes to the memories and histories contained within flesh and the overall “fragility and conductive capacity” of the body, Antoni said.

When Green-Wood was founded in 1838, two decades before the first public areas opened in Central Park, it was intended not only as a cemetery for the dead but as a gathering space for the living. That ethos informs Green-Wood’s decision to present *I am fertile ground* as well as *Spirit Labor*, a film about Antoni’s creative practice and collaborations, plus a series of workshops incorporating meditation and a talk with Antoni herself.



Janine Antoni, *I am tool and substance*, 2019, mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf.

RALPH SMITH/© JANINE ANTONI/COURTESY THE ARTIST, LUHRING AUGUSTINE, NEW YORK, ANTHONY MEIER FINE ARTS, SAN FRANCISCO, AND THE GREEN-WOOD CEMETERY, NEW YORK

“Commissioning art for a cemetery is a bit complicated,” Harry Weil, Green-Wood’s director of public programs and special projects, said. “In the public imagination, cemeteries carry very particular cultural and religious connotations, and are too quickly categorized as spooky or creepy.” But art might help turn Green-Wood into “a major cultural destination,” Weil said, in the minds of New Yorkers and curiosity-seekers from elsewhere.

Green-Wood’s commissioning of *I am fertile ground* follows an art project there by Sophie Calle: *Here Lie the Secrets of the Visitors of Green-Wood Cemetery*, which was presented by the nonprofit organization Creative Time. Calle’s work, for which visitors can write personal notes and bury them in a grave created by the artist, started in 2017 and is set to continue until the year 2042.

While Antoni’s installation will not remain for 25 years, the artist said it has the potential to form meaningful spiritual connections between the living and those buried at the cemetery—with special resonance among the vaults in the catacombs that she did not utilize for *I am fertile ground*. “There’s a rhythm to the encountering of the work that I’m interested in,” she said. “The empty vaults draw out the presence of the bodies, families, generations.”

I am fertile ground also has the potential to “facilitate deeper, more engaged conversations that

are not solely focused on death and dying,” Weil said. “As much as we like to think of cemeteries as cities of the dead, they were—and still remain—intended for the living.”

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GREEN-WOOD CEMETERY

JANINE ANTONI