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By Nolan Kelly



Installation view: Janine Antoni: *I am fertile ground* the Catacombs at The Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, 2019. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco. Photo: Christopher Burke.

On balmy days in the 19th century many New Yorkers would take their carriages to Green-Wood for a picnic and some artistic viewing. The famous Brooklyn graveyard predates both Central Park and the Metropolitan Museum by several decades, and was one of the largest public spaces in the city at the time to also be filled with art—sculptures and sepulchers in every style. In the intervening years, as generations changed hands and the city encroached around it, Green-Wood began to face the unique problem of having more residents and fewer visitors. One solution to this, a nod to the Victorian Era fascination with life among death, is the cemetery’s renewed vigor as a site of artistic presentation.

In 2017, French artist Sophie Calle installed a tombstone with a mail slot in it, and the inscription “Here Lie the Secrets of the Visitors of Green-Wood Cemetery” (2017). For the next 25 years, visitors can go and deposit their secrets at the site, which will periodically be exhumed by Calle and burned. This, on top of periodic poetry readings, concertos, and trolley tours, have brought a crowd to Green-Wood for more than just mourning, and the expanding attractions tell of a legitimate interest on the part of the cemetery to become a space for artists’ work.

The latest addition to this work is *I am fertile ground*, a site-specific project by the Bahamian-American sculptor and performance artist Janine Antoni. The piece is located in Green-Wood’s catacombs, one of the oldest standing structures in the 478-acre cemetery. Normally closed to the public, the catacombs house the remains of some of New York’s earliest wealthy families, and are now being opened for the first time as a site of installation.

In 10 sepulchers zig-zagging across the subterranean catacombs, Antoni has installed a series of mixed-media works evocative of gestures both healing and

### ON VIEW

**Green-Wood Cemetery**  
Saturdays & Sundays,  
September 21 – November 17,  
2019  
Brooklyn

consuming. Ornatly framed and covered in gold leaf, they appear at first as something out of the Medieval period, and indeed many of them follow a layout reminiscent of devotional panel paintings from that era. But look closer and you will see that the images are actually photographs, many of Antoni's parents and the artist herself, which show hands clasped or grasping at other body parts, and which, when put in the context of the artist's life, signify a shocking intimacy.

More shocking are the frames themselves, which pass at first glance as ornate gilding, but on closer inspection are revealed to be crafted in styles deeply evocative of the gesture they contain. A diptych of hands clasping breasts is fused together by the frame of a golden spinal cord, and the piece itself becomes a ribcage, pulled open in exhalation. Another depicts a hand (Antoni's mother's) curling around an ear (her father's) and is inlaid with pointillist protrusions which turn out to be moldings from the bones of the ear themselves, the smallest bones in our body. Antoni created the frames using casts from actual bones as tools, and, apart from providing a delirious medium specificity with the images inlaid, it creates an effect within the mausoleum that is both haunting and vivid.

*I am fertile ground* is a piece imbued with the themes of Antoni's work—the body as an artistic tool, both for making and meaning-making, which corresponds to the art objects that will inevitably outlast it. Her work as a product hinges upon her physical form in the time she makes it, a period sometimes as specific and short as the instant of a photograph. These images, framed in gold and placed under the oculi within each sepulcher, give these moments a cast of spiritual eternity.



Janine Antoni, *I conjure up*, 2019. Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco. Photo: Christopher Burke.



Janine Antoni, *I unfold, I infold*, 2019. Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf, 12 3/4 x 24 3/4 x 7/8 inches. Commissioned by The Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, NY. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco. Photo: Christopher Burke.

This effect was compounded on the night of the installation's grand opening earlier this fall, when Antoni conducted a live performance in conjunction with the initial viewing. Visitors entered the catacombs following a troupe of 10 ecstatic dancers—dressed idiosyncratically in all black—who each took up a position in a room opposite an installation and delivered a gestural movement and corresponding mantra. Facing the ribcage piece, with visitors passing between, a performer with a chronic spinal condition delivered an incantation, and mimicked

the gesture of the painting across her. Later, tea was served, the leaves of which had all been culled from the flora of Green-Wood, which had bloomed from the soil of the dead.

This seemed in some ways to be the thesis of Antoni's work, at the intersection of physical and mystical, what a short film screened at the grand opening described eponymously as "spiritual labor." It is the type of labor which is made all the more significant by its installation at Green-Wood. It's a shame that the performance was a one-off, given the beautiful enactment of the works, but *I am fertile ground* is free and open to the public every weekend through November 17th. There are sure to be visitors paying their respects.

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#### Contributor

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**Nolan Kelly** is a writer and filmmaker based in Brooklyn, NY.



Critical Perspectives on Art, Politics and Culture

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