

# HYPERALLERGIC

---

ART

## Janine Antoni Traces the Passage of Time in a Cemetery's Catacombs

The artist's new commission leaves much to contemplate simultaneously — mortality, desire, and the ways in which absence and longing are such a fundamental part of life.

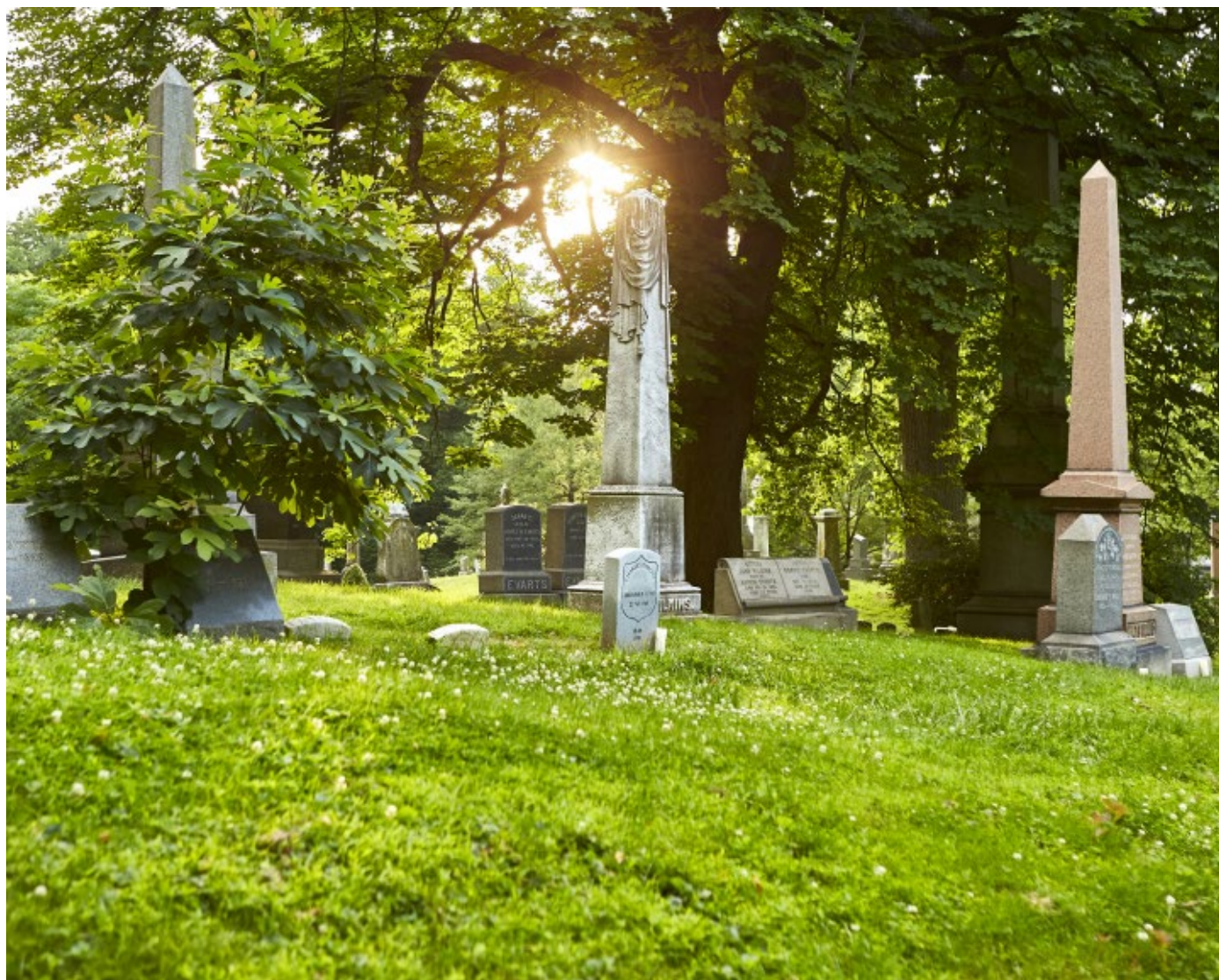


Laura Raicovich November 8, 2019



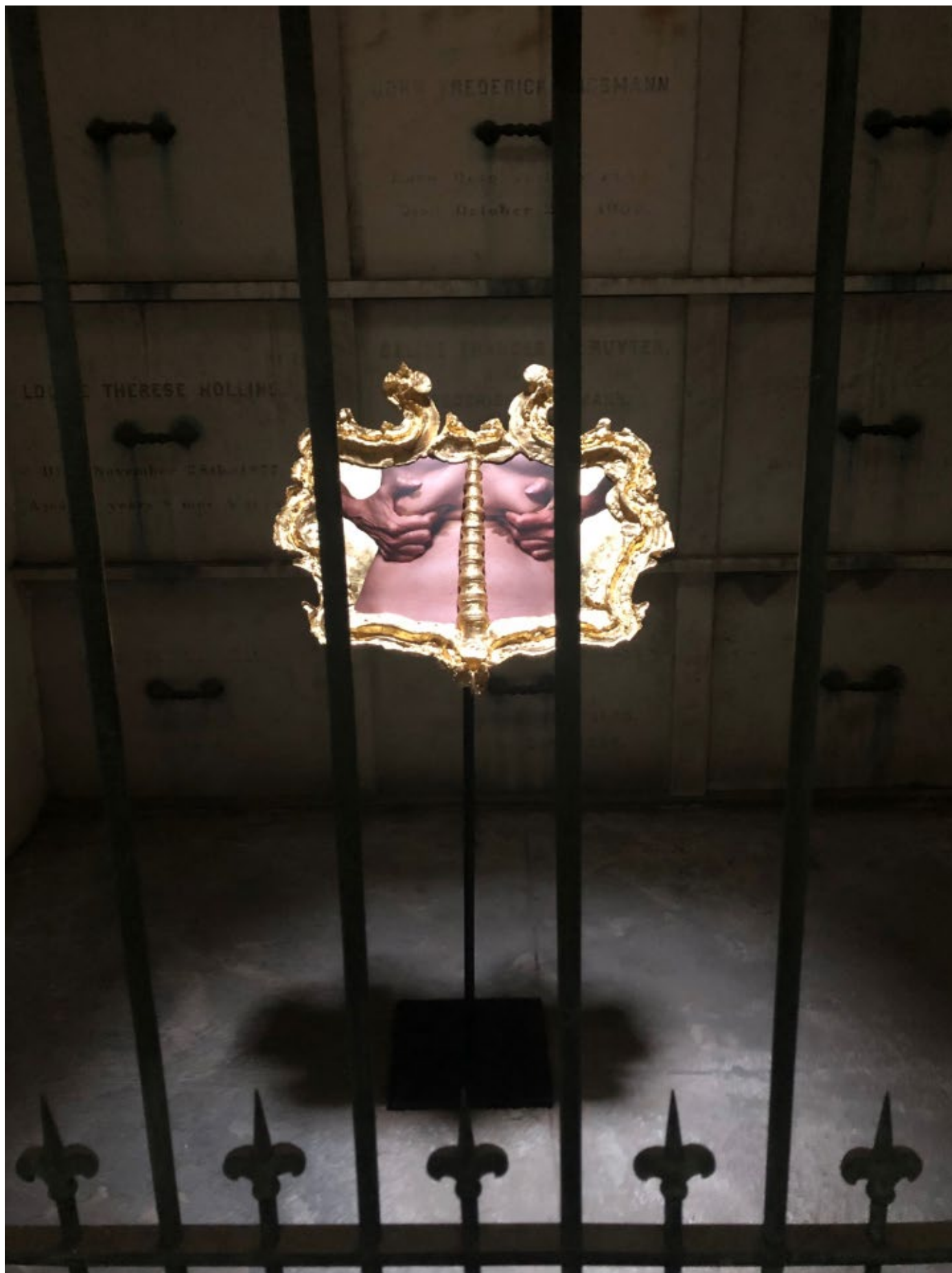
Janine Antoni "I unfold, I infold" (2019), mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf Installed: 12 3/4 x 24 3/4 x 7/8 inches, flat: 12 3/4 x 28 1/4 x 7/8 inches (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic, unless otherwise noted)

The catacombs of Brooklyn's historic Green-Wood Cemetery are situated at the intersection of several winding roads and paths, among the many marble markers of lives lived recently and in the deep past of our city. In the darkened hall of this narrow space, a glow emerges from the distant back wall. To the right and left are vaults, most dedicated to specific families whose dead were received long ago. These small, gloomy spaces are each lit from above, lending them a church-like feeling wherein the underworld remains touched by the light of day.



Green-Wood Cemetery (photo by Justin Falchook)

On Saturdays and Sundays from September 21 through November 17, 2019, visitors to these catacombs will encounter a group of new works by artist [Janine Antoni](#) amidst the markers to the dead. Her installation, [“I am fertile ground,”](#) comprises 9 sculptures, each situated in one of the catacombs’ 30 vaults. Each work features a close-up photograph of various body parts — hands, feet, ribs, ears — encased in an elaborate gold frame with baroque details which, upon closer inspection, appear to be molded from the bones of the body part pictured. These single images, diptychs, and triptychs, dramatically lit from the skylight above, are reminiscent of medieval reliquaries, Eastern Orthodox icons, or personal devotional objects.



Installation view, Janine Antoni "I open the gates" (2019) Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf 23 x 25 7/8 x 2 1/4 inches (58.42 x 65.72 x 5.72 cm)

Hyper-pigmented, the photographs appear almost painterly, even as their photographic accuracy challenges this possibility. Each body is captured in the midst of a gesture or movement — hands grasping the edge a ribcage, forcing the flesh of the abdomen inwards under the pressure of the grip, or a sun-spotted hand tugging an earlobe. In many of the images, the skin is smeared with dirt or gold pigment, further accentuating the texture of the dermis, its lines and folds. It seemed to me that the photos were of both younger and older figures, which Antoni confirmed included herself, her parents, and her daughter, all of which contributes to the sense that these works are fundamentally about time, and the ways in which its passage records itself on flesh.



Janine Antoni "I conjure up" (2019) Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf 14 1/8 x 16 1/4 x 1 1/8 inches

Antoni's installation is particularly intriguing due to its context at Green-Wood

Cemetery. The artworks play off the seasonal changes in the landscape brought by fall weather emphasizing the never-ending cycle of life. Indeed, while Antoni's references to life and death via the materiality of the flesh remain front of mind, I wondered about Green-Wood's approaches to such a sensitive curatorial project at a site that is both a historical monument and an active cemetery.



Detail, Janine Antoni "I am tool and substance" (2019) Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf

While the cemetery has been organizing public programs such as concerts and film screenings, as well as walking tours for over 15 years, it has only recently begun commissioning artworks by contemporary artists. Antoni's project follows one by [Sophie Calle](#), initiated by Creative Time and co-presented with Green-Wood in 2017. Calle's [Here Lie the Secrets of Green-Wood Cemetery's Visitors from 201-2042](#), is a 25-year-long installation, a monument situated near the entrance to the cemetery with a slot through which visitors may slip pieces of paper inscribed with their secrets.



Janine Antoni "I am fertile ground" (2019) Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf Installed: 12 7/8 x 19 5/8 x 5/8 inches (32.7 x 49.85 x 1.59 cm) Flat: 12 7/8 x 20 1/8 x 5/8 inches (32.7 x 51.12 x 1.59 cm)

Harry Weil, Green-Wood's director of public programs and special projects, told me that he seeks projects that "make Green-Wood inclusive of many, and prioritize



moving people through the landscape.” He emphasized his intention to avoid anything kitsch or “spooky” in favor of taking a more sophisticated approach to death and dying, and therefore to life as well. In its sensitivity to the intimacy of death, this curatorial position is part of why Antoni’s project fits so beautifully into not only the physical space of the catacombs, but also in the context of the cemetery and its ongoing activities.





Janine Antoni "I speak up" (2019) Mixed media gilded with 24 karat gold leaf 21 x 18 1/8 x 2 3/8 inches (53.34 x 46.04 x 6.03 cm)

Amidst the daily grind of youth-obsessed culture, there is something quite literally grounding about visiting Green-Wood Cemetery. Walking its verdant, leaf-strewn paths, one appreciates New York City's history from a different vantage point, while also reconnecting with the embodied reality of being human, of our unavoidable impermanence. Within Green-Wood's catacombs, Antoni's project leaves much to contemplate simultaneously — mortality, desire, and the ways in which absence and longing are such a fundamental part of life.

Note: There will be a [special performance](#) on Saturday, November 16, 2019; 2 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. Free and open to the public.

*Editor's note (11/8/2019, 12:19 pm EST): a previous version of this review misstated the number of sculptures in the installation. There are 9, not 10 sculptures on view. We regret the error.*

*[I am fertile ground](#) continues at Green-Wood Cemetery through November 17. The site-specific exhibition is curated by Harry Weil, with generous support from the National Endowment for the Arts.*