“Forests proceed civilization and deserts follow.” De Chateaubriand

Nearly every early culture depicts the mythological Tree of Life as a symbol of hope, fertility, regeneration, the connection between the mortal and immortal worlds, and the generosity of the earth. The Tree of Life proposes that supplicants’prayers for all such benefits might be absorbed into its roots, cleansed through its capillaries, and sent in upwards-reaching branches, slipping past the ancestors towards the golden illuminating sun.

Similarly, nearly every culture also describes a matriarchal version of the Earth/Universe as a creating, nurturing, embracing and unifying female or feminine force. For the Greeks her name was Gaia; for the Romans she was Terra; for the ancient Babylonians she was Tiamat; for the Incas she was Pacha Mama. Early cultures recognized and celebrated the primeval feminine as not just the source of life, but the embodiment of the earth and a mediating manifestation in human form of the Tree of Life. She is the first goddess to shelter and restore humans from their mortal misdeeds and bestow the necessities of Grace upon them.

This Goddess/Tree, as we might call Her/It here has recently encountered the formidable *Homo Colossus*. Once we humans were called *Homo Sapiens*, back when the seeking and gaining of knowledge motivated and defined us. Now we are set on an insidious ecocidal path.. As Homo Colossus, we are the unstoppable purveyors of avarice, cutting down the forests where the Trees of Life flourished, fouling the waters with toxic effluence, depleting all the earth’s resources, while coincidingly desecrating the sanctity and power of women’s bodies and selves. This process has happened in lengthy stages of time, while the unearthing of knowledge, of *good*, shifted nearly unnoted to the un-earthing of technology, and of *goods*.

The identity and power of the Goddess/Tree is lately in dire need of being honored and resurrected in the long aftermath of this patriarchal suppression and degradation of the natural world. We need to summon her back, and offer her tribute, if there is indeed to be any time remaining for healing.

These are the Colossus-exacerbated conditions where we find Michelle Gagliano and Beatrix Ost’s collaborative installation on the generous and necessary wisdom of Feminine Omnipotence. Each of the five phases of the artists’ multimedia project concept is achieved through a sharing and mediative process between the two women, who bring their early lives as daughters and then mothers, and current lives as deeply close friends, to the immersive consciousness of the project. Both artists have long focused on ideas and interpretations of the earth as sacred guide and giver, using its mediums and inspirations to celebrate the mysteries and offerings of Nature.

Divided into five darkened rooms, the separately sectioned environments are titled: “*The Promise*”, “*Symbiotic Tango*”, “*Nature Nurture*”, “*Beauty is Harsh*” and “*Look from the Edge*”. The number 5 is a critical numerology for the installation, referencing the five senses, the five extensions of the human body, and the five continents of earth. Additionally, the number 5 card in a Tarot deck is The Hierophant, an advocate of learning and a messenger between mortals and the heavens.

In the first room encountered by the journeyer, five small gilded chairs sit atop a pile of black rice. Overhead a massive golden branching system extends downward. Seemingly ominous at first, it conveys the mythological roots of the Tree of Life. As it shelters and reaches toward future occupants of the small chairs to envelope them in its nurturing care and grace, it connects the continual stream of young comers to their ancient ancestors, immortalized in the long cellular history of the tree.

In Room #2, “*Symbiotic Tango*”, a continuing pathway of black rice leads again to five more gilded wooden chairs, situated along with objects from nature and surrounded by groupings of abstract paintings. A chaos suggests itself in the arrangement of the disheveled and upturned chairs. Disagreements and changes of opinions or positions seem to have had a part in the scene we encounter. Yet within the surrounding paintings are subtle clues to the narrative of the room: endless findings, arrangements and situations that seek to interpret both the inexplicable motives and deeds of human nature intermingled with the rich dark mysteries and tragedies of the natural world. Life and death always coexist in those mysteries, along with struggle and desire, indiscretion, and revelation.

In Room #3, five golden hanging spheres made from vines, but containing modern detritus suspend above five cracked ceramic bowls that have been repaired with gold powder, and placed on tainted white rice. They are offerings of sorts to the earth, to the gods and goddesses, but they demonstrate the helplessness of supplicants who cannot keep pure even a gesture of prayer, for all the degradation they have let into their environment. Nonetheless, the *Kintsugi* process of mending the broken bowls, as part of a Japanese philosophy of embracing the beauty of human flaws. offers a sense of understanding, kindness and reconciliation to the scene. The protagonists of the story are still trying to set things right. Surrounding the central installation is a series of five paintings titled “*Nature Nurture*”. The two artists’ paintings also propose replenishment as they seek to summon forth and emphasize the beauty of nature and goodness from the undeniable and rampant evidences of civilization’s rapacious tendencies.

In Room #4, “*Beauty is Harsh*” two great earth paintings that wrap and enclose the walls like theatre curtains are titled “*The Circus of Irresponsibility*”. They depict, in red mud renderings, self-indulgent characters romping and engaging in various follies and vanities. Clay masks furthering the sense of human detachment have been fastened to the canvas, and dead rats have been embroidered onto it. A dining table takes up the center of the room. Five bales of hay have been pulled up to it as seats. This table offers another large broken but unrepaired ceramic bowl, containing a loaf of baked bread. The hay bales made ready for the five guests however, are not high enough to be able to enjoy a meal compared to the height of table. It is like a moment from Alice in Wonderland, where Alice cannot quite reach the bottle that will save her. Scattered about around the bales are shards and fragments, waste from past meals, discarded without appreciation for what sustenance they once provided. And now there is dearth. The viewer is beginning to sense, to almost taste, the destructive evidence of our invasive effect on earth.

In the fifth and final room, the Goddess, made of straw and fungi, and corseted in a lead girdle, lays as though a sacrifice, on a metal cart. “The Last Tree”, the Tree of Life sits guarding her, golden in hue and holding blown glass nests filled protectively with natural elements. The walls of the room are completed with another series of seven paintings titled “Perpetuity Question”. It is an altar of remembrance and devotion to Nature; to Gaia, Terra, Tiamat, and Pacha Mama’s immeasurable universal power, wisdom, and beauty. It is a potent solemn final reminder, as we viewers depart the installation for our busy consumptive world, that She is desperately threatened, asking to be protected and honored, to be restored along with all her children, us.