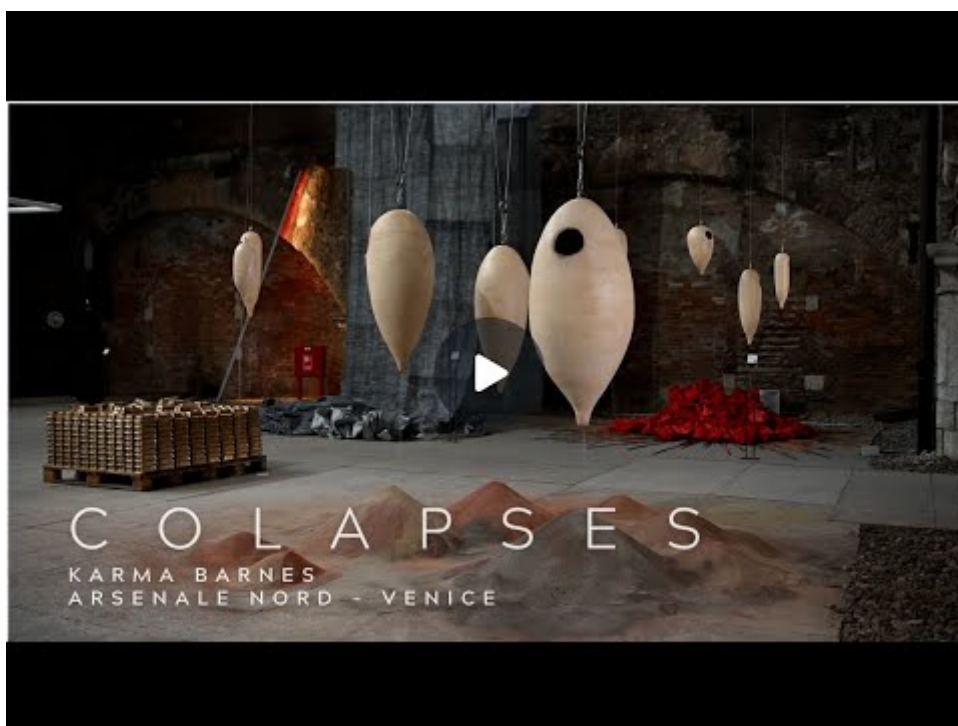




ART NEWS PORTAL

Karma Barnes' Intersections of Art, Biomimicry, and Reshaping Environmental Adversity: Insights from

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Interdisciplinary artist Karma Barnes has just returned from presenting her sculptural installation Co-Lapses at the prestigious Arte Laguna Prize Finalist Exhibition in Venice. While in Italy, Barnes also participated in the UNIDEE Art Residency at Cittadellarte, an influential art foundation founded by Michelangelo Pistoletto. As an ambassador for Pistoletto's Third Paradise project, Barnes further explored her creative practice aimed at reshaping environmental crises and human connection through art.





Interdisciplinary artist Karma Barnes, has just returned from presenting her sculptural installation, *Co-Lapses* (2024), at the Arte Laguna Prize Finalist Exhibition in Venice. While in Italy, she also attended a Unidee Art Residency at Cittadellarte, an art foundation established in 1996 by Italian Arte Povera artist Michelangelo Pistoletto. As an ambassador representing Australia and New Zealand for Pistoletto's Third Paradise project, Barnes continued her research into reshaping notions of confronting environmental crises, and created two new installation works, *Tutto è Fatto di Tutto il Resto* (Everything is Made of Everything Else) and *Filo di Terra e Speranza* (Thread of Earth and Hope).

Barnes's multidisciplinary practice explores the intersections of art, ecology, and community, focusing on collaboration and the social impact of environmental change. Originally from Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa-New Zealand, and now based on Bundjalung Country in Australia's Northern Rivers, Barnes creates site-responsive installations and participatory works that critically engage with the evolving relationship between people and their environments. Her new body of work is informed by her lived experience and applied knowledge derived from grappling with climate-induced disasters on the east coast of Australia. To support those facing loss and grief, she develops responsive frameworks through creative recovery and community-engaged art practices, generating resourcefulness and hope in the face of adversity, anticipating strength for future generations. The materiality and formal qualities of her sculptural works connect viewers with an intuitive and conceptual understanding of ethical commitment of care underlying her aesthetics.

Indeed, Barnes' practice is deeply immersed in an aesthetics of care. That is to say, care for the communities with whom she interacts; care for the environment both natural and manmade in which her relational actions and material installations take place; and care for the future of the Earth and all its inhabitants – humans and nonhumans alike.

Co-Lapses (2024) at Arte Laguna

The Arte Laguna Finalist Prize Exhibition (18th and 19th editions) showcased her work alongside that of two hundred international artists. Within the dramatically soaring architecture of the venerable Arsenale Nord, these artists' paintings and sculptures in diverse media represented contemporary, emerging art from around the globe.

In Venice, Barnes debuted a monumental re-iteration of *Co-Lapses*, originally exhibited on a smaller scale in Australia in 2023. Now extraordinary in size and effect, *Co-Lapses* (2024) is a poetic family of suspended biomorphic pods representing both human and



nonhuman bodies, entanglements, and interdependencies, symbolising a shared passage of time, chance, and change. The site-specific installation, fabricated in 3D printing, results from Barnes' use of imaging technology; the pods echo traditional earthen sculptural practices. They stream local industrial pigments, used for painting Venice's buildings, downward from nipple-like openings. A slowly forming landscape builds into ten peaked, miniature mountains, referencing ancient relationships between bodies and the land. Thus, *Co-Lapses* is a durational piece whose underlying terrain physically mutates its size, colour, and shape throughout the exhibition. The installation as a whole calls to mind the passage of deep time, as well as Earth's biological and social systems.

Originally, Barnes' motivation for the work emerged from observing mud wasps building their nests in her studio: the tiny earthen capsules they constructed on walls and ceiling were multi-coloured red and yellow ochred, due to the insects' taking pigments from her collection. As such, *Co-Lapses* is a poetic translation of the wasps' design strategies for protecting the eggs they lay. Here, in keeping with Pistoletto's aims to harness interdisciplinary research to usher in *The Third Paradise*, Barnes' interest in biomimicry comes into play. Biomimicry is the contemporary practice of translating nature's strategies into the world of human design for problem solving, and the application of natural systems and processes toward creative human solutions. *Co-Lapses* eloquently reminds us that entanglement of Earth's inhabitants extends beyond human perception and boundaries: our world is co-created, through human-nonhuman and other-than-human relationships.

Barnes' work interrogates how Western civilization has constructed an entirely artificial world, setting off irreversible environmental degradation and over-consumption in most facets of the everyday. As caretakers, humans' role is to safeguard the planet. The concept of Pistoletto's *Third Paradise* creates a harmonious balance between the artificial and the natural, requiring a fundamental rethinking of the ethical principles and values guiding collective existence. *The Third Paradise* serves as a powerful metaphor, inspiring individuals to take personal responsibility in shaping a shared global vision of care.

As Barnes has stated, "During my residency, the opportunity to live and work within Cittadellarte – a manifestation of *The Third Paradise* and its principles – allowed for deep reflection and development of my conceptual practice. Experiencing Michelangelo Pistoletto's works in person provided an intimate, unique lens through which to consider how the principles of *The Third Paradise* can create a meeting ground – a place for dialogue and connection."



Founded in 1996 by Arte Povera artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, Cittadellarte investigates and supports creative interface of the arts with sustainable practices and the natural environment. While there, Barnes immersed herself in the philosophy of The Third Paradise – a concept developed by Pistoletto advocating for harmony of nature, humanity, and technology. Using positive approaches through the arts, education, politics, spirituality, nutrition, and economics, The Third Paradise addresses the environmental challenges facing all Earth’s denizens. As Pistoletto has put forth, the word paradise originates from Ancient Persian and means "protected garden."

For Barnes, the “ethical and aesthetic implications of relationality between humans and the world” are based upon relations of equality, “rather than exploitation or contractual obligation.” A sense of impartiality plays out in her work, whether it be sculpture or painting, as can be seen in Tutto è Fatto di Tutto il Resto (Everything is Made of Everything Else) and Filo di Terra e Speranza (Thread of Earth and Hope). In both she incorporates localised clay and industrial pigments, such as pompeian pink, terra rosa, sienna, and yellow ochre to explore the interconnectedness of all things whether they be of humble or more illustrious origins. Tutto è Fatto di Tutto il Resto (Everything is Made of Everything Else) was then presented at Unidee Open Studio.

With Tutto è Fatto di Tutto il Resto, she makes textured circles from clay and pigment, placing them vertically on the wall, echoing The Third Paradise symbol of rebirth. Where the bottom circle meets the floor, she places small spheres crafted in the simple Japanese art ofodorango (mud ball) in a linear outline of the rebirth symbol. Thus, three flat, vertical circles meet a tripartite, volumetrically dynamic infinity symbol prompting consideration of a meditation on the abstract and the real.

Notably, of these twenty to thirty mud and pigment balls (which on a micro scale resemble planets, such as Mercury, Mars, or Jupiter), approximately ten are in various stages of disintegration. For Barnes, the humble yet beautiful and elegantly crafted installation, “reflects the cyclical nature of creation, destruction, and renewal.” In Tutto è Fatto di Tutto il Resto, Barnes has taken Pistoletto’s rebirth theme and transformed it into a meditation on balance, wholeness, infinity, and decay. Of his theorem of trinamics, Pistoletto has stated it to be, “the dynamics of the number three. It is the combination of two units that gives rise to a third distinct and new unit.” For Barnes, this installation fosters dialogue about resilience, hope, self-responsibility, and interdependence in the face of climate change.

She explains further that, “By exploring the psychological and internal transformation as reflective of external environmental shifts and changes, with one side of the triple infinity



Third Paradise symbol representing the creation process and the opposite side showing the destructive process. The middle of the symbol has a coming together of wholeness. Subsequently, the three circular forms creating the triple infinity on the wall all present as forms of wholeness and manifestation of The Third Paradise. The work reflects geological shifts over long durations and psychological shifts and emergent states of being as a way of finding hope through the comprehension of impermanence and reflection on the context of time and change.”

Filo di Terra e Speranza (Thread of Earth and Hope), a collaborative piece created with Francis Saverio Teruzzi, Cultural Project Manager for Artivator, incorporates thirty-two small-scale paintings inspired by Barnes’ conversations with the nearby Cervo river, snow, and earth. The organically-shaped paintings incorporate an Italian pigment palette of industrial colours and graphite. The paintings are hung by invisible filaments from Pistoletto’s three-metre-long cast iron Third Paradise symbols (also suspended, but from the ceiling). They embody humanity’s interconnectedness with the environment in a visual language of abstract marks, gestures, color, and texture. The paintings, floating weightlessly at a height of about two metres, can be seen as forms Barnes observed in drawing observations. These include remnants of geological cycles left in the earth, imprints left behind by water and its active motion, as well as stone and rock shards formed by weathering and erosion – all fragments of a larger dialogue persisting in the landscape. Their shapes reiterate negative spaces of Pistoletto’s airborne, elliptical sculpture; their liveliness contrasts with the solidity of their surrounds, that is, the white, bricked arches of Cittadellarte’s nineteenth century industrial space’s vaulted ceiling. For viewers, the activity of moving around underneath the hanging paintings, experiencing them up close individually, or at a distance as a lyrical, and changing whole, offers them an active role within the conversation.

Barnes explains, “My work embodies the quiet strength of resilience and optimism,” and references the idea of “glimmers” – small moments of light and hope guiding us through challenging times. Her installations transform these fleeting, positive experiences into powerful symbols of collective healing and ecological care. Looking forward, Barnes will continue to bridge the realms of research, installation, and social practice. Her art will serve as a call to action. By embedding the principles of The Third Paradise into her work, she will seek to inspire communities to embrace compassion, self-responsibility, and interconnectedness.

Carol Schwarzman is a visual artist and arts writer based Meanjin/Brisbane Australia. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland, researching art-science collaborations with nonhumans.