

# DOWN TO EARTH

Grace Knowlton & Domestic Ideals at Lesley Heller Workspace

By John Haber

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If you want attention, consider filling a gallery with truckloads of dirt. But if you want instead to have a lasting impact, consider importing geology memory by memory and bit by bit. **Grace Knowlton** has been doing just that for more than forty years. It has kept her just under the radar, but deep within the consciousness of practicing artists.

It has also made her the subject of repeated rediscoveries, and if, as I hope, you find time to catch Lower East Side galleries during *fair week* in New York, you can add your own. Review after review over the years has marveled at her neglect as if for the very first and last time. With luck, a survey of work since 1975 will serve as a prelude to a fuller retrospective, but who knows. Like her art, it is comprehensive but not at all large, at **Lesley Heller** through March 8, and it depends on juxtapositions across time and space as if they occurred just the other day. Her sculpture has the look of weathered timber and raw earth, but with patience it takes on associations of craft and home.

The show does not run chronologically, but then her art has not so much evolved as continued to find new expression. Born in 1932, Knowlton studied with Kenneth Noland, the **color-field painter**, but found herself sculpting spheres. They suggest both the formal perfection of geometry and an evolving earth.

The gallery quotes her as relishing her early ceramics as a “secret space closed off forever,” but spheres also look outward to the universe, and they have a way in her hands of bursting apart. An arrangement on the way in groups six smaller pieces from as recently as 2013 around a larger one from 1991. They range from closed spheres to one peeled back against the floor like *Woman with Her Throat Cut* by **Alberto Giacometti**, as if they were flying apart in orbit.

Knowlton says that she first thought of sculpture as a surface for painting, before taking it seriously as an object. Yet she is still painting and glazing even now, in crossing arcs of white against black or black against white. The central planet has its own unstable surface of polished steel, while still smaller spheres have a surface of pinned white paper. All have visible imperfections attesting to time and the artist’s hand. Their personal histories include alternative materials, such as bronze, iron, plaster, Styrofoam, and clay. Any one of them could stand as well for fragments of earth.

Knowlton started getting her hands dirty as early as 1975, with the sculpture known as *Dirt Piles*. The show’s oldest works, a set of eight, rest on a platform just off the floor. One can treat them, too, as distinct ceramics or a single work. Dirt piles or not, they take the shape of volcanoes or lava flows, a shape picked up in Robin Peck’s weighty sculpture at **Canada** through March 29, and a painting from that same year appears in the process of erupting. Still other dirt piles amount to loops of graphite on paper. They could be documenting the making of art or its instability.

**Walter de Maria** drew more than enough attention in 1977 with a roomful of dirt in Soho. His *New York Earth Room* marked the shift from earthworks as subject to entropy and decay, like *Spiral Jetty* in the Great Salt Lake for **Robert Smithson**, to **childish displays** and **trashy installations** for better or worse. He led directly to *The New York Dirty Room* by **Mike Bouchet** and *A Psychic Vacuum* by **Mike Nelson**. Nelson excavated beneath a gentrifying Lower East Side to reveal a hidden New York of his own making, but also a New York lost to time. **Agnes Denes** could still claim a connection between feminism and land art in 1982, with her wheat field in Battery Park City. Yet it gets harder and harder to reclaim public and private land for regeneration and growth.

Knowlton shares the gallery with a group show nurturing and savaging “**Domestic Ideals**.” It, too, sets aside the big gestures, but not without a struggle. Joan Linder finds life at once small in scale and out of control, in a collage of bills and reminders or the unwashed crowding, meticulously drawn, of a kitchen sink. Marcie Revens has way too many possessions as well, in suitcases unready for her to unpack or to carry away. Katya Grokhovsky’s clothing has taken on a comic life of its own, like the proverbial empty suit but for an independent woman, while Paul Loughney’s paper collage weaves between closed spaces and an unmade bed. Ryan Sarah Murphy photographs suburban and New York neighborhoods as sites for looming dark silhouettes, but A-CHAN still cannot bring to an end the search for a “vibrant home.”

Knowlton, too, refuses nostalgia, but in order to reclaim space for everyday things and change. She has photographed sawhorses and chairs, added paint in response to the shapes and texture of wood, and rephotographed the results. She looks up close and corner-on, because the joints holding things together matter as much as what they support. Is she calling attention to her studio worktable as a construction all its own or as a place for art? Surely both, much as bronze floor pieces from 1986 redouble corners of the gallery. Either way, displacement and dirt need not preclude home.