

Nancy Mladenoff, [Vortex](#), 2005



Oil and acrylic aerosol paint on canvas, 72 x 90 x 2 1/2 in.
Gift of the artist, 2019.39

Within the current global environment, we experience nature as the new “other” in contemporary culture.

– Nancy Mladenoff¹

¹ Chazen Museum of Art, [2008 University of Wisconsin-Madison Art Department Faculty Exhibition](#), exh. cat. (Madison: Chazen Museum of Art, 2008), p. 47.

Artist's Biography

Nancy Mladenoff (American, b. 1957) was born in Michigan and grew up in Hurley, Wisconsin, a small town in Iron County in the northern part of the state. There, her father, uncles, and grandfathers were iron-ore miners in the Gogebic Range mines that operated from the mid-1880s until the mid-1960s. The mines were shuttered in 1965, causing widespread unemployment, but Mladenoff's entrepreneurial father owned a gas station and a U-Haul truck rental business, allowing the family to survive the devastating effects of the closures.

In contrast to the industrial focus of the community she grew up in, Mladenoff's childhood was centered around the natural environment. The artist recalls exploring the nearby woods, prairies, rivers, and lakes, which nurtured her fascination with the life forms that inhabited them: "My life was very much in nature...I always had my hands in the minutiae of nature...what I could touch." From the age of four or five, Mladenoff kept notebooks full of drawings and scrapbooks with construction paper cut-outs, most of which she still has, and which have served as an archive of imagery and inspiration throughout her career. Reflecting on the relationship of humans, especially children, to nature, Mladenoff stated in a 1993 interview: "I wonder what it is that when you're a child you don't feel very powerful. You think of something like a frog or insect that's smaller than you. You look at it and hold onto it. It's the one thing you could be powerful over..."² The artist explores this power dynamic between humans and animals in her early narrative work, which draws on children's stories that convey messages about violence and evil forces at work in society, as well as provide examples of compassionate behavior.

In her teens, Mladenoff sought out adult education and community college art classes, followed by enrollment at UW–Madison where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Art in 1982. She went on to earn a Master of Fine Arts degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1987. Following brief teaching stints at the University of Texas at Austin and at the Illinois Institute of Technology, she joined the faculty of the Art Department at UW–Madison, where she taught painting and drawing until her retirement in 2019. On that occasion, the artist donated the painting *Vortex* to the Chazen.

Throughout her career, Mladenoff has engaged with issues of gender, nature, science, and the environment. While the human figure was central to Mladenoff's worldview and storytelling style in her early work of the 1990s, beginning in the 2000s the artist's style changed. She turned her interest to horticulture, entomology, ornithology, geography, history, and contemporary culture. Following her childhood impulses to explore and record nature through sight, touch, and drawing as the principal means of learning about plants, animals, and insects in her environment, Mladenoff evolved her practice. She began to incorporate layered and abstract imagery of natural and manmade objects into her compositions through digital manipulation and mixed-media painting. It is through her aesthetic work that she hopes to draw viewers into an important dialogue.

"I'm not a scientist or politician, but, for me, trying to make the ideas of sustainability something aesthetic, something that people really want to feel, 'Oh, I want to be a part of that!' without being

² Mladenoff, Nancy, interview conducted by Maria Saffiotti Dale, New York City and Madison (December 2, 2020).

preached to... art has its own different way of doing that. I want to give you an aesthetic experience that might get you to then think about these things after you're done looking." The artist decided to do this in part by abstracting her subject matter. She explains her aesthetic choice: "I didn't want it all realistic, I wanted something definitely more abstract, so the viewer had to work at it a little bit. It needed to be beautiful enough to get people to want to even bother."³ Abstract shapes within her compositions complicate her subject matter, leaving the viewer more to decipher it more than if it were presented in a figural style

From 2005 to 2006, Mladenoff created a series of five paintings inspired by the city of Madison, shown together in the 2006 exhibition *Between the Lakes: Artists Respond to Madison* at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art. The paintings were titled *Vortex*, *Suspension*, *Undertow*, *Spanning Time*, and *Foreshadow*. All the paintings integrate structural elements with aspects of landscape. *Undertow*, for example, evokes the swirl of water as well as the human activity centered around the city's lakes, indicated by the appearance of docks. Boardwalks likewise appear in the painting *Spanning Time*.⁴ While Mladenoff integrated manmade elements into the landscape, she omitted any depiction of human beings themselves. She explains that her intention was to underscore the interconnectivity of living things: "I really felt that if people could give this idea of nature a chance and really wrap their head around all this interconnectivity, they would see their own part in it. And maybe by downplaying their own physical presence, they could see that, wow, this stuff is important. It's not just there for our viewing, we have to take an active part in it."⁵

Following Mladenoff's creation of the series, her brother (a forest ecologist at UW–Madison) introduced her to the ecological concept of biomes, or communities of plants and animals that have developed in response to a shared physical climate. Between 2006 and 2010, the artist traveled around the country making paintings inspired by important natural areas that were environmentally compromised, such as the Florida Everglades, the bayous of Louisiana, and the Pacific Northwest, which respectively represent aquatic, grassland, and forest biomes.

In 2007 and 2008, Mladenoff pursued an interest in the more-precise depiction of fauna and flora that had arisen during the creation of the 2005–2006 Madison painting series. She challenged herself to learn about species of insects, birds, and plants, inspired by the monumental tome *Birds of America* by the nineteenth-century American naturalist, ornithologist, and painter John James Audubon, which illustrated all the bird species of North America. Mladenoff created three series of watercolors titled *Post Audubon, Birds of North America*; *Post Audubon-Insects of North America*; and *North American Insects Birds & Plants*.

The artist's research from 2005 through 2010 brought to her attention the interrelatedness of species and the effects of climate change on the evolution of native and non-native species.

³ Mladenoff, Nancy, interview conducted by Maria Saffiotti Dale, New York City and Madison (December 2, 2020).

⁴ [Undertow](#) is in the permanent collection of the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.

⁵ Mladenoff, Nancy, interview conducted by Maria Saffiotti Dale, New York City and Madison (December 2, 2020).



The Art of Sustainability



Location

Vortex is installed in the Mezzanine Gallery on the third floor of the Chazen building. To view this artwork in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

Visual Description

Vortex is an oil and acrylic aerosol painting on canvas created by Nancy Mladenoff in 2005. Rectangular, it measures six feet by almost eight feet and hangs on the wall in a horizontal orientation. The painting features a muted color scheme of mostly blues, greens, and black with small amounts of yellow and orange. The background of the painting is a brownish-gray, which seems to have been diluted as evidenced by visible brush strokes that create pooling.

In the middle ground of the painting, elongated flat, black shapes emanate from a spiral and appear to grow and stretch as they get closer to the painting's edges. The spiral begins slightly off center in the painting's right half. Most of these shapes are organic and resemble things found in nature such as insects and plants, but some are geometric and resemble built structures, such as a fence or building. Many of these black shapes appear to be shadows of the objects in the foreground. In the foreground, where similar organic and geometric shapes appear in pastel purple, yellow and orange, and further mimic the growing spiral. Here, the artist introduces new shapes, such as wine glasses and pots and pans, some of which do not cast black shadows. These shapes seem to have been stenciled and spray painted as evidenced by their crisp edges and mottled surface.

The bits of yellow and orange suggest a light source, which is further reinforced by the black shapes resembling shadows. When looking at the foreground, middle ground, and background together, the painting seems to move like water as shapes ripple out from the central spiral, swirl, and float toward the edges.

Content and Context

Mladenoff created *Vortex* in 2005 as a memorial to her then-recently deceased father. It was the first of the series of five paintings created between 2005 and 2006 on the subject of Madison. She reflects on this work as the origin of the group: “This is the bare bones initial painting... So, this is the germ of the whole series... because I felt so strongly about nature and how it had... so much to do with my background, that’s why I wanted to make these paintings.”⁶ *Vortex* engages with various aspects of the theme of sustainability: primarily, the sustainability of flora and fauna in the local environment and the evolving role of native and invasive species.

In this work, Mladenoff leaves out the human figure that often appeared in her artwork from the previous decade and focuses the viewer’s attention on the natural elements of flora and fauna, and manmade objects of daily life. *Vortex* features silhouettes of everyday objects (wine and martini glasses, a cooking pot, furniture, women's boots, and a pearl necklace), as well as pairs of native and invasive flora and fauna, including plants (wild indigo and creeping snowberry), insects (spiders and cockroaches), and an imported bird species (European sparrow).

In preparing to create this painting, along with the others in the 2005–2006 series, the artist researched the ecological history of Madison and selected animal and plant species that have existed here for millennia, as well as those that were introduced more recently. The European sparrow arrived in Madison in 1877 after having been introduced to the New World by Europeans. An invasive species, it drove away many local bird species over time. Wild indigo, on the other hand, is an indigenous plant in the region. It is poisonous in large doses but Native Americans used it to make poultices for snake bites, among many other medicinal uses. As curator Jane Simon explained in *Between the Lakes*, “This tug and pull between native and non-native, beneficial and harmful, was just the tension Mladenoff sought for her visually layered paintings.”⁷ Sustainability is about balancing the preservation of the natural environment and the presence of human activity, which disrupts that balance. The challenge is to find ways to preserve natural resources and the environment for future generations.

Vortex is informed by memories from Mladenoff’s childhood and the palette is more somber than is typical for her work. The artist remembers a distinct event from her childhood, when she was about seven years old: a tornado touched down in the family’s backyard overturning, their camping trailer three times and destroying her swing set. At the time, she and her mother were in their living room. They were overcome by loud noises outside the picture window, which was obstructed by her father’s parked U-Haul trucks. Unable to see the destruction in their yard, Mladenoff recalls her mother’s reassuring and calming embrace during the raging storm. In reporting the event, the local newspaper ran a picture of Mladenoff and her father standing next to the overturned trailer, which sealed the event in her memory as a proud moment. The unconscious association of her father’s memory and this

⁶ Mladenoff, Nancy, interview conducted by Maria Saffiotti Dale, New York City and Madison (December 2, 2020).

⁷ Fleishman, Stephen, and Jane Simon, *Between the Lakes: Artists Respond to Madison*, exh. cat. (Madison: Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, 2006), p. 26



episode of destruction by a tornado—a vortex—might well have been at play during the creation of this painting.

To construct *Vortex*, the artist sourced images from her own photographs or from online images to create outlines and silhouettes of the forms, which she digitally manipulated. . Then, Mladenoff projected the distorted shapes onto a blank canvas and used oil paint and acrylic spray paint to capture the abstracted images and create the final painting. The resulting work of art is a swirling image that evokes a dynamic life force. Mladenoff reflects on the intended impact she hopes this painting and others like it exerts on the viewer: “I wanted these all-encompassing, experiential paintings, that, when you stood in front of it [*sic*] you could feel like you were swept up into the vortex, like this one, to involve the viewer more.”⁸

The overarching theme Mladenoff conveys is the interconnectedness of the natural world and its human inhabitants, particularly as applied to Madison, Wisconsin. Through her art, Mladenoff engages viewers and inspires us to heighten our awareness of the environment and humans’ role in it.. This painting, , *Vortex*, is an exercise in abstracting and distorting natural and manmade forms to create imagery that captures the attention and draws the viewer into the work. Interconnectivity is at the center of the artist’s intention and speaks to the theme of sustainability and the role of the individual in contemporary society as an active participant in shaping the future of our planet, starting with our local communities.

⁸ Mladenoff, Nancy, interview conducted by Maria Saffiotti Dale, New York City and Madison (December 2, 2020).

Discussion Questions

1. Is sustainability demonstrated in this painting? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. There is no evidence that this work is made from sustainable materials. Can a piece of art encourage sustainability when the work itself is not made with sustainable or recycled materials?
3. Create an alternate title for this work. Defend your new title using visual evidence to support it.
4. Mladenoff references her interconnectedness to nature repeatedly. Do you have an interconnected relationship to nature? Is it passive or active? Positive or negative? How does she demonstrate interconnectedness in this work?
5. Mladenoff's painting speaks to the concept of balance and the tension between natural and manmade elements. How does this relate to sustainability?

Collection Connections for Further Engagement: *Not all these artworks are currently on view; click the titles of each to determine if they are currently on view in the museum, and in which gallery.*

Suzanne Caporael (American, b. 1949), [379 \(Elbe Estuary, Germany\)](#), 2002. Oil on linen, 60 x 96 in. Carolyn T. Anderson, Frank and Roa Birch, Alice Drews Gladfelter Memorial, Alexander and Henrietta W. Hollaender, and Earl O. Vits Endowment Funds purchase, 2003.5

This painting (which will be on view at the end of February in an exhibition of the artist's work in the Pleasant T. Rowland gallery) features the unique environment where salt water from an ocean meets fresh water from an inland river. Estuaries are important ecological zones that foster a variety of flora and fauna. Rather than depicting the landscape literally, Caporael captures the sense of the landscape in an abstract image.

Martha Glowacki, (American, b. 1950), [My Arcadia](#), 2000. Mixed media, wood cabinet, 79 x 62 x 34 in. Elvehjem Museum of Art General Endowment Fund purchase, 2000.88

As a child, Wisconsin artist Martha Glowacki collected bones, rocks, and insects, which was the origin of her fascination with cabinets of curiosities. This work incorporates natural and manmade found objects, scientific illustrations of plants, historic photographs of Wisconsin harvests as well as death photographs. The work's symbolism comes from nature, particularly the life cycles of plants, insects, animals, and humans.

Tom Uttech (American, b. 1942), [*Nin Mamakadendam*](#), 2010. Oil on linen, 84 x 96 in. Carolyn T. Anderson Endowment Fund, Chazen Museum of Art General Endowment Fund, Stanley J. Lenerz Endowment Fund, and Richard E. Stockwell Endowment Fund purchase, 2011.1

Tom Uttech's work evokes the memories of life-long experiences camping in his native Wisconsin Northwoods. The artist's love of nature and commitment to the environment manifests itself in his life and in his art. His passion for bird watching has informed paintings such as *Nin Mamakadendam*, in which the artist includes a plethora of different bird species, including shadows of extinct species, as a form of memorialization.



Additional Resources

Nancy Mladenoff's website: <http://www.nancymladenoff.com/> Brehmer, Debra, "Studio Visit: Nancy Mladenoff," *Art Muscle* vol. 7, issue 5 (June/July 1993), 18-20. [Kohler Art Library, AP A784 M981, in library use only]

Ciezadlo, Janina A., *A Remembrance of Awakened Birds: Nancy Mladenoff and Eleanor Spiess-Ferris*, exhibition catalogue (Kenosha: H.F. Johnson Gallery of Art, Carthage College, 2010):
<https://www.carthage.edu/live/files/2595-a-remembrance-of-awakened-birdspdf>

Fleishman, Stephen, and Jane Simon, *Between the Lakes: Artists Respond to Madison*, exhibition catalogue (Madison: Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, 2006) [Kohler Art Library, N6535 M33 B48 2006, in library use only]

U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Circular on English sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)," *Ornithology and Mammalogy Circ. No. 2* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Biological Survey, 1886), <https://congressional-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/congressional/docview/t66.d71.a504-2?accountid=465>

U.S. Department of Agriculture, "English sparrow as pest," *Farmers' Bulletin no. 493* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1917), <https://congressional-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/congressional/docview/t66.d71.a1.9-493?accountid=465>

UW-Madison Education, *UW-Madison Professor of Painting and Drawing: Nancy Mladenoff* (posted July 24, 2012), 2 minutes, 57 seconds: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nu06BqsM1UM>