

# JESSICA HAYS

**BODY BREEZE EARTH:  
2023 MFA PHOTOGRAPHY THESIS EXHIBITION**

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**DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES**

**May 9 – May 20, 2023**

# BODY BREEZE EARTH: 2023 MFA PHOTOGRAPHY THESIS EXHIBITION

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*Body Breeze Earth* presents the graduate thesis exhibitions of Jessica Hays and Erica McKeehen in Columbia College Chicago's Photography Department.

**Jessica Hays** presents pieces from two bodies of work, *The Sun Sets Midafternoon*, which combines image, text, and video to explore climate grief and solastalgia through the lens of wildfire, and *Horizon Line*, a monumentally scaled handmade artist book rooted in experiences of reverence and appreciation for the land while recognizing it as both open and divided concurrently.

**Erica McKeehen** (who performs as Greta-X) combines imagery from her long-term portraiture projects *Secret Mermaid* and *REVEAL*, which profile McKeehen's close friends and fellow burlesque performers and sex workers, *Secret Mermaid* and *Kitty Tornado* (respectively), alongside her own self-portraits in *Days of Rust*, to present nuanced views of femme sexuality, autonomy, and experience.

*Body Breeze Earth: 2023 Photography MFA Thesis Exhibition* is presented in conjunction with the Department of Exhibitions, Performance, and Student Spaces (DEPS) and the Photography Department. These projects were partially funded by The Albert P. Weisman Award, a private trust of Columbia College Chicago. The printing of the photographs in this exhibition was made possible with the generous support of Hahnemühle.

# JESSICA HAYS

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**Jessica Hays'** artistic practice investigates intersections between climate change and psychology, using environmental phenomena such as fire, drought, or the appreciation of empty space as a lens to examine how land influences the human psyche. Driven by a deep love for the land, Hays works with concepts of land use, degradation, and restoration. Rooted in the American West, she experienced accelerated climate change firsthand, and came to understand some of these changes not only in terms of their scientific and ecological impacts, but also the personal and social changes they create. Later, her work became more directly informed by concepts such as solastalgia and climate grief.

Working with such topics as grief and loss of landscape takes a heavy emotional toll. In addition to making images expressing the grief and loss of landscape, her practice involves making images that are meditations on land use and the sense of belonging to the landscapes she inhabits. Collectively, Hays is working at reconciling the land as both a place of joy and of grief.

Engaged with ideas of the contemporary sublime and awe, Hays' work recognizes both the fear and wonder that can be derived from climate disasters and the land in of itself. The allure of these images are at the same time how they become powerful messengers. Her work aims to explore the long-lasting effects of the land on human psyche from trauma to restoration.

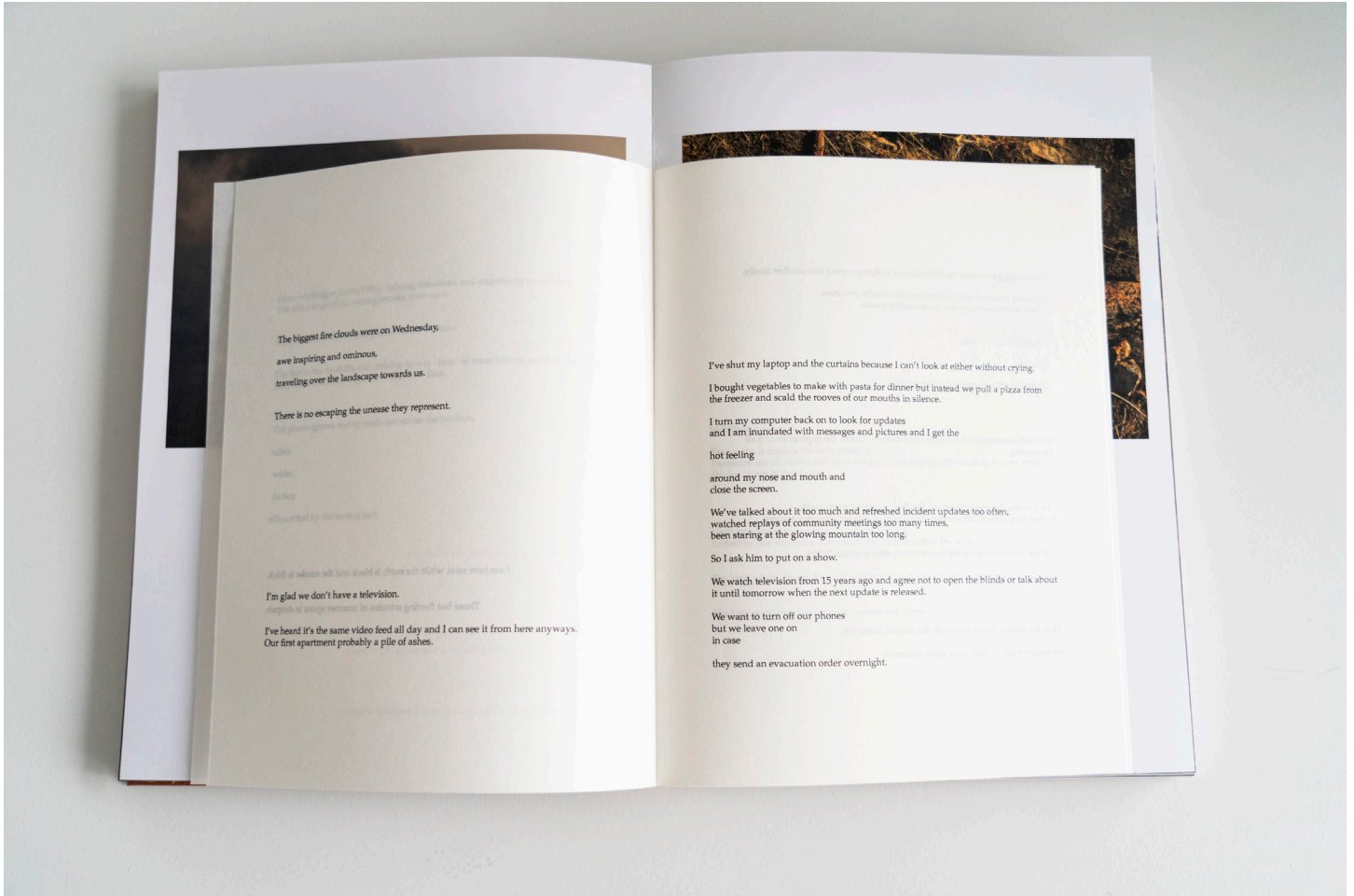
**Jessica Hays** is a conceptual photographer, alternative process printmaker, and artist based in Montana and Chicago. Her work includes handmade artist books, alternative process printmaking, photography, written work, and video among other combinations of techniques. Her work has been shown nationally and internationally in galleries and museums. It has been published in a variety of magazines and textbooks and is held in several public and private collections in the US and Canada. Hays received two bachelor's degrees concurrently from Montana State University and will earn her MFA at Columbia College Chicago in 2023.

**Website:** [jessicahaysart.com](http://jessicahaysart.com)

**Instagram:** [@jess\\_the\\_photographer](https://www.instagram.com/@jess_the_photographer)



*The Sun Sets Midafternoon Artist Book*, 2021, archival pigment prints on matte and washi paper, handbound, 12" x 17 ½" 156 pages



*The Sun Sets Midafternoon Artist Book*, text view, 2021, archival pigment prints on matte and washi paper, handbound, 12" x 17 ½" 156 pages



Installation View, *Solar* (Large), *Alder* (Left), and *Splinter* (Right), 2021, Phototex and archival pigment prints, 7'x10'



Jessica Hays and Todd Anderson, *A Tale of Two Valleys*, 2022, archival pigment print on washi paper, 18" x 27"



*Mullen, 2021, Archival Pigment Print, 40"x60"*





*Exposed Lake Bed, Jackson Lake, Wyoming, 2022, chromoskedasic sabbatier altered silver gelatin print, 8" x 10"*



Installation View, *Drought Wall*, (L to R) *Dry River*; *Elephant Butte at 3% Capacity*; *Rio Grande Running Dry*; *Boat Launch*; *Hydrophobic Flood, 2022*, chromoskedasic sabbatier prints and archival pigment prints, 10'x40'



*Horizon Line Artist book View 1, 2023, archival pigment prints on washi paper, handbound, 12" x 60" open*



*Horizon Line Artist book View 2, 2023, archival pigment prints on washi paper, handbound, 12" x 60" open*

# INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA HAYS

Conducted by Rachel Manlubatan

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**Rachel Manlubatan:** When did you first find interest in the relationship between climate change and psychology? How did you decide you wanted to explore the emotions of grief and solastalgia through photographs?

**Jessica Hays:** I had interests in these areas long before I consciously combined them in my work. As an undergraduate at Montana State University, I earned two bachelors degrees, one in Film and Photography and one in Environmental Studies, while also minoring in Psychology. At the time, my work was very different, and a lot of people were confused as to why I was pursuing so many seemingly divergent paths at once. I was just pursuing my passions, and I think it was later that these things came together. Following my interests in all of these areas prepared me to make the work I make today with a strong foundation in understanding both climate data and psychological research.

When I watched my own community go through a kind of collective trauma following the Bridger Foothills Fire, that's when things really clicked into place. We are all so connected to our environments, and cultures in mountain towns especially so. It made sense that these climatic events would have impacts beyond ecology, and I was drawn to asking questions about how that took shape in our psyches.

**RM:** In your artistic practice, you recognize the trauma and grief that comes with climate change, while also meditating on the inherent joy that resides within nature. Can you speak to how you balance these opposite feelings that often exist in one site?

**JH:** The work in response to the inherent joy and reverence I feel for our surroundings is perhaps a bit of an antidote. I think these topics of grief and how we respond to climate

disasters in terms of psychological shifts are incredibly important lines of inquiry, but the work can take a toll. I need to spend time reminding myself that the reason I, and many others, feel such an intense grief for the land is because we love it so much, and that respect or love or honoring of the land also requires the kind of inquiry and attention that I give to trauma and grief in response to climate change.

I remember having a studio visit when I was coming out of a really intense period of photographing fires and working with people who had lost homes or property to wildfires. At the very end, the woman visiting asked how I was doing, and said this was difficult stuff even if it was important. Her advice was to always find something to find joy in in my practice, even if most of my work deals with more difficult topics. I heeded her advice and I think it's made it easier to keep going in climate and grief related work without getting burned out.

**RM:** Your photographs consistently contain a dramatic and expansive look while maintaining the different ideas and themes of your work. How has your style changed throughout your engagement with photography? Do you pre-plan your compositions and shots, or do you choose them in the moment?

**JH:** My style has shifted significantly over my artistic career, but I can find roots in what I am doing now way back at the beginning as well. There's a path that I can trace through my work that is a slow and gradual development, but I'm not sure it's always apparent to others unless pointed out. There's situations where projects grow out of each other, and something that didn't work in one project had the roots for the next thing I end up working on. I'm usually working on a few ideas at once too, especially since I've become more focused on environmental phenomena that may not

## INTERVIEW CONTINUED

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occur year round, or be accessible to me all the time.

I would say I typically work very instinctively. Certainly at the beginning, I am working and I know there's something there, but I'm still getting at what it is. Once I am further into a project though, I do more planning or looking for something specific. For example, the third summer I was out on fires, I knew I wanted to photograph the edge of a burn perimeter, and I was looking for a demarcation that was visually clear instead of the slow fading out that often occurs in forest fires. That summer I made three pictures in the body of work that really show that demarcation between burned and unburned. When I started *The Sun Sets Midafternoon* though, I was just out because I knew instinctively that I had to be there, had to be making this work. I felt like I couldn't look away.

**RM:** How did you come to use your process and materials? How do you think your processes affect the way a viewer encounters your work?

**JH:** Process is an important part of any project. I work in alternative processes, printmaking, and book making along with more conventional photographic methods. Each project or idea can need its own considerations for process and presentation, and I shift with each project, experimenting a lot before settling on how a body of work will exist in the world.

With *The Sun Sets Midafternoon*, I envisioned it as a book almost immediately. There's something about the absorptive quality of books that felt like a good fit, as well as the slow and personal way people could view the work. As text became a more integral part of the project, the book form really stood out as how the project needed to live. For the wall,

I knew this project needed to feature large prints, for similar reasons. There's a quality of confrontation or absorption that operates similarly to a book but in a space that multiple people can inhabit at once. Pulling the text out on the wall shifts for each exhibition space as well.

In other works, I've considered the way the body interacts with the piece, such as *Horizon Line*, where an embodied relationship with the land is represented through the scale forcing physical movement in order to view the piece. I also consider how altering images may emphasize or communicate my ideas in several bodies of work, such as *Low Water* or *Empty Memories*. I always consider the way process, size, format impacts and influences how the viewer will encounter my work.



## THE DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

The DEPS Artist Profile Series presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community. The DEPS Artist Profile Series is managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Rachel Manlubatan and Sierra Delamarter. Graphic design is also managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Rachel Manlubatan. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at: [colum.edu/deps](http://colum.edu/deps)

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