

Faith Wilding at Anat Ebgi

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Faith Wilding, *Fossils #8 (...A Half Burned Out Apple Tree Blossoming)* (2021). Graphite on paper, 32.25 x 24.5 inches.

A “ghost lineage” is a species thought to have once existed despite leaving no trace in the fossil record—a “hypothesized ancestor,” as the collective authors of Wikipedia would have it. Seemingly sapped of color and named for an imprint of life, Faith Wilding’s collected *Fossils* at Anat Ebgi quietly reckon with ghostliness and ominously speculate into both past and future. If you have known, or are, someone who expresses severe anger with terrifying and lucid calmness, you may recognize something in Wilding’s tone here: restraint along with righteousness, grief, and maybe even some surrender.

Wilding’s ten graphite drawings show botanical forms that alternately spiral, unfurl, burst, transform, mutate, split, blossom, or otherwise grow and die. There are yoni-mandorlas in abundance, as in *Living Fossil #2 (My Heart Shell Breaks Open)* (2021), and spermatozoal strings pulse within the bulbous form of *Fossils #7 “The Force...Green Fuse”* (2020–21). Breaking and birthing become verbs that take center stage, most literally perhaps in the sinewy, heliotropic *Fossils #8 (...A Half Burned Out Apple Tree Blossoming)* (2021), in which new growth shoots upward from a split in a decaying tree trunk. Collectively, the images unquestionably depict plants and the reproductive shapes that plants and humans share—eggs/sperm/seeds, vulva-like voids, and ripening bulbs.

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Wilding renders these mutual forms with frankness, teasing out the peculiarity of the cultural hierarchies that separate animal and plant, male and female. In bringing this absurdity to the fore, she also, if indirectly, sets up another question: Why is it common to so readily interpret botanical imagery and fractals—facts and forms of Life on Earth—as feminist, environmentalist, New Age-y, fringe?

The work of answering this question has everything to do with Wilding’s long and varied career. Alternately using performance, fiber art, drawing and painting, collage, and cyberfeminism, all underpinned by activist gestures and a robust body of writing, Wilding has insistently challenged reductive structures that sideline both women and the environment. Her early 1972 performance of *Waiting in Womanhouse* conjured an everywoman mourning her agency from birth to death, and, as part of the same exhibition, *Crocheted Environment* (the “Womb Room” more colloquially, itself a kind of waiting room) publicly claimed a spacious existence for the uterus, among other things. In her works referencing historical figures and texts (as in the *Natural Parables* series, 1982) and environmental research (as in the *Monsanto-condemning Paraguay: Republica de la Soya*, 2017), Wilding insists that biology is generative and empowering and not meant to be used in service of marginalization and destruction.

With her larger body of work in mind, *Fossils* feels like an X-ray, revealing Wilding’s five-decade drumbeat in irreducible terms: gestation, birth, growth, survival, death, repeat. Making a morbid semantic play by titling her series *Fossils*, Wilding further bends the conventional understanding of the word by designating two of the works as “living fossils.” *Living Fossil #3* (2021) frames just the midsection of a gnarled tree with a darkly shaded core that could be the pith of a living tree, or the hollowed insides of a dying one. Equipped with calm fury, pared-back tools (paper, pencil, words), and the concerns of biology, gender, and agency that have defined her career, Wilding again constructs a space of indeterminate waiting where we may consider what may still be born from our gravely damaged earth.



Faith Wilding, *Fossils* (installation view) (2021)