

TARRAH KRAJNAK

AUTOMATIC ROCKS/ EXCAVATION

Tarrah Krajnak's expansive art practice incorporates photography, performance, archival research, ritual and poetry to explore how her body intersects with larger social, political and historic events and notions of race, belonging, rootedness to land, and historical trauma. In the two series "Automatic Rocks/Excavation" and "Ayni, Offerings for My Sister", the artist experiments with ecopoetics and photography as a tool to connect with ancestral pasts. Through her embodied practice, Krajnak examines her complicated and fractured identity as an Indigenous transracial adoptee. The artist was born in Peru and placed in a Catholic orphanage immediately after her birth, and adopted by an American family from a coal-mining town in eastern Pennsylvania.

"Automatic Rocks/Excavation" is the result of Krajnak's personal engagements with the ground in her immediate home environment in California, and which subverts traditional (often colonial and patriarchal) conceptions of landscape photography. Handling rocks that were dug up in her own backyard, Krajnak contemplates what it means to excavate – not just literally, but metaphorically – the earth beneath our feet, the histories that are embedded within the land and, by extension, within our bodies. Held carefully, tenderly in both hands, the rocks are photographed and paired with eco-poems – a form of writing through which she enacts a different way of knowing or accessing the world. The poems help Krajnak elicit memories and name the individual rocks as inanimate beings, but also place her within a long genealogy of women's writing on nature.

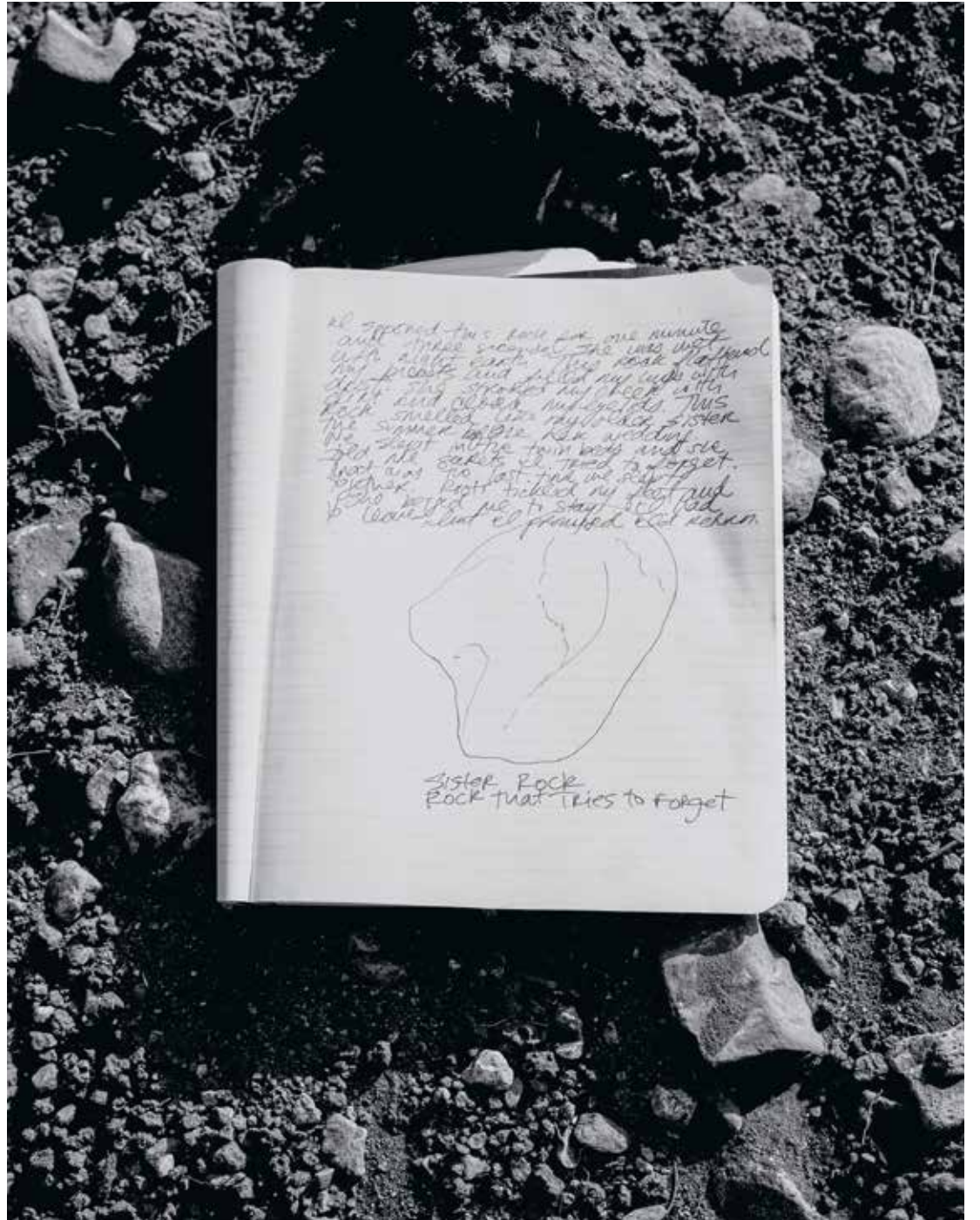
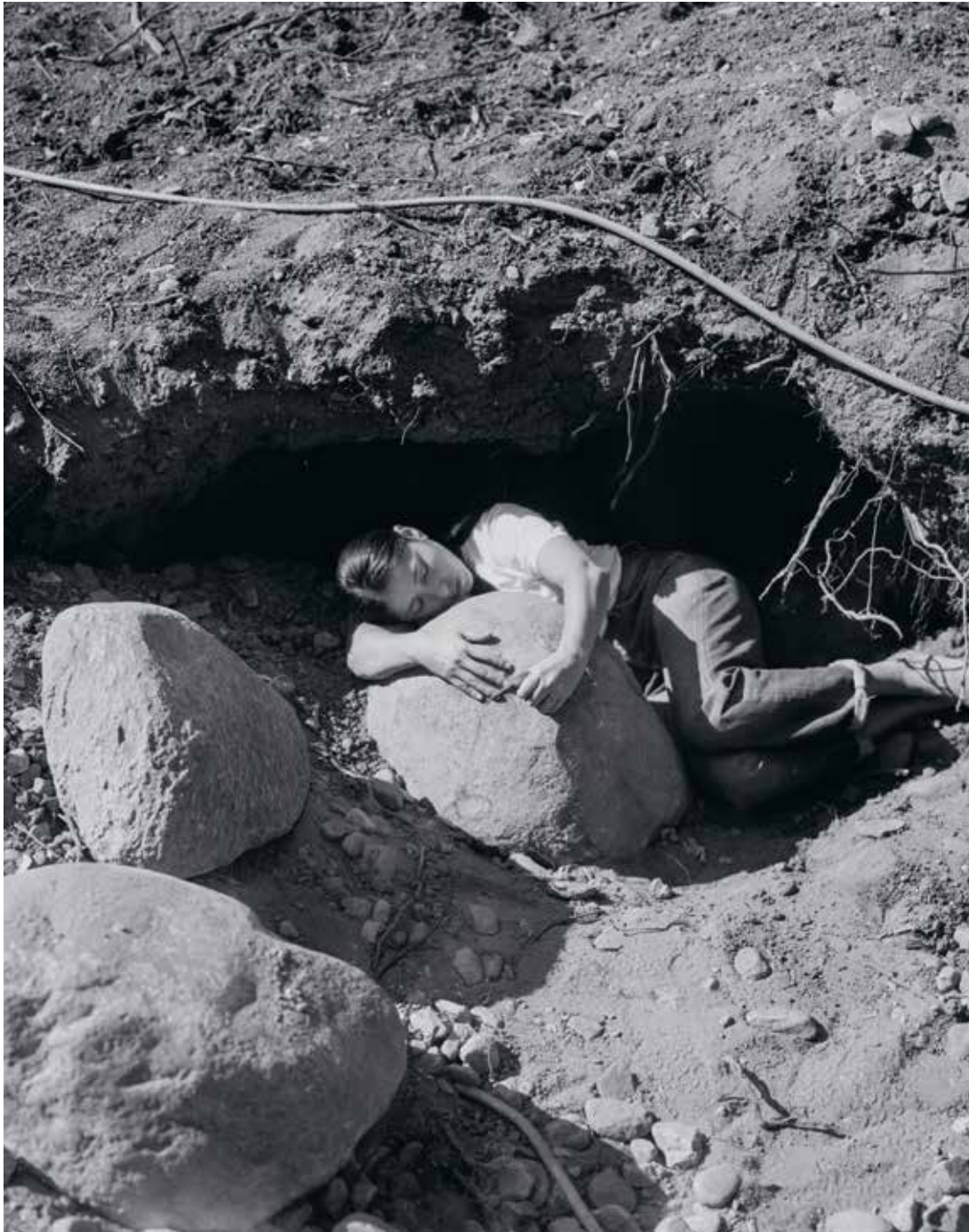
"Ayni, Offerings for My Sister" takes its name from a word in the Indigenous language Quechua, *ayni*, which means "balance". The form of the work draws on the Andean *despacho* ritual, in which *paqos* (Peruvian shamans) place flowers, leaves and food on white paper as an expression of gratitude to Mother Earth. Tracing the similarity between this process and one of the earliest techniques of photographic printing, Krajnak made these cyanotypes by carefully placing plants and her own feet in standing meditative poses on photosensitive paper, recording their outlines with multiple, prolonged exposures. In both "Automatic Rocks" and "Ayni", Krajnak employs the ritualistic use of photography to create new possibilities for human-earth connection and to convey an age-old worldview that regards the earth as an entity to be honoured and respected.

"Automatic Rocks/Excavation", 2022
© Courtesy Galerie Thomas Zander

Rock of Animal Heart/Rock that Clots Blood
Elbow Rock/Rock that Pierces
Rock of Two Mothers/Rock that Bruises
Rock of River Sound/Rock that Drowns
Men's Laughter
Sister Rock/Rock that Tries to Forget







CHLOE DEWE MATHEWS + TARRAH KRAJNAK IN CONVERSATION

In the spring of 2023, Lima-born, Oregon-based artist Tarrah Krajnak and Chloe Dewe Mathews Zoomed to talk about artistic practice, the environment, life, time, politics and influences. Working across photography, performance and poetry, Krajnak shares with us her thinking behind her most recent bodies of work.

Chloe Dewe Mathews

So, tell me, have you been living on the West Coast for a long time?

Tarrah Krajnak

Yes, I used to be in Claremont [CA] but I recently moved north of California, in Oregon, for a teaching position. I also needed a change after the pandemic, but I love the West Coast. Over the last three years, I've been photographing a site called Big Creek Reserve, on the California Coast near Big Sur, as part of a residency called "Unseen California". Northern California has a similar climate to where I live now. It's just really beautiful and wet and green, the complete opposite of the desert.

C. D. M. So, you made "Rock, Paper, Sun" in California?

T. K. Yes, but I think of that work as being more connected to my body than to a location. It's more about the domestic space, the home and the yard. However, I like the idea of working with what is "at hand" or local. Because the work is "of a place", when I look at it I see the texture of the Californian desert.

C. D. M. There's a real sense of time spent outside in that work, exploring your immediate surroundings. But then there's

also this wonderful sense of the balance between what you're exploring outside and what you're bringing inside to the studio. Those two spaces, the natural environment and the studio environment, seem so important in your practice.

T. K. Indeed, my work takes place inside the studio as much as it does in the field and in the library. There's a movement between these spaces. I use photography as a way to learn, but also to write and to explore. I feel like landscape photography, especially here, out West, has such a long, problematic colonial history. So I was looking for a way to make landscape photographs that might be different and challenging. I'm exploring a radical locality through working from the home or the yard; all these domestic spaces consciously or unconsciously linked to "women's work". With my large-format camera I can commune with what is right outside my window. It's also a way to keep working when I'm not travelling for other projects.

C. D. M. So, do you work at a certain time of day or in a particular way at a certain time?

T. K. In a way, yes. I'm trying to get back into the rhythms of daily life. This kind of work demands quiet, finding a space for contemplation, learning how to be present, how to free the brain from the clutter. I'm at a point in my career where I feel pressure to work more, produce more, exhibit more, and I think resisting this is necessary to the work. I actually think less is more. The home studio is really a good place for me to make work. It's exciting to be in a new home, and have a whole new ecosystem around me to earn from. For example, after teaching them in a class, I've been making anthotypes.

C. D. M. Could you explain what anthotypes are?

T. K. They're a very early form of camera-less photography where you make an emulsion from plant materials. So you could take one or two rose petals and make a print. You mash it in a mortar and pestle and brush it on to paper. I have this whole photo-recipe book, all with ingredients from my yard. As I was making "Rocks/Excavation" and "Ayni", I was also examining plant materials, learning scientific names and researching natural dyes. This is very slow work; it would take maybe a week for an anthotype exposure to appear with the Los Angeles sun.

C. D. M. Oh, wow. I didn't realize that.

T. K. Some plant materials are more light-sensitive than others, depending ... you might be able to make something a little more quickly: in full sun, it would take three days. I was really interested in slowing down the process.



For Maria, from "Ayni, Offerings for My Sister", 2020
© Tarrah Krajnak, courtesy Galerie Thomas Zander

C. D. M. I'm very aware of a duality in myself, both wanting to slow down but also being aware of a constant sense of urgency and the need for action. I suppose I'm also relating this to the climate crisis: "Time is running out!" "How much time do we have left?" And I wonder, if one of the ways you navigate that stress and noise is by having a slow and meditative practice, if it's partly an antidote.

T. K. Yes, it is! I've always worked slowly. When making "Rock, Paper, Sun", I was thinking of our human embodied experiences. Our thinking occurs through senses, through a unique engagement with the world. A lot of that work was about daily rituals such as walking, swimming, eating, sleeping or dreaming. I was very engaged with dreaming at that time: wondering where dreams come from and how we might access them. As an Indigenous transracial adoptee, I've been cut off from my biological background, so I was also thinking about my experience of going back to Peru and learning these rituals which belong to my ancestors. I've been cut off from those really important ways of knowing. My work then becomes a way to connect to my ancestral past, but the work also represents the nature of the transracial adoptee experience or what it's like to be born into orphanhood. We have this desire to belong, and a longing to "return" to our "origins", but we're unable to return because the very idea of origins is also mythological. My origins have to be imagined.

C. D. M. In this very simple, focused way you're walking around your small perimeter, making work that has a direct engagement with the natural world. So I was wondering, would you say there's an outward-looking, environmental agenda in "Rock, Paper, Sun", or is it purely the documentation of a very personal ritual?

T. K. Absolutely. My work as an artist is deeply connected to my role as an educator. I teach a class called "eco photography". In this class I'm posing the same questions I pose in my work. I'm asking: "Is it possible to have a no-waste photography?" I'm also thinking about the politics of disappearance and the aesthetics of disappearance. If, on one hand, we might think of the invention of photography as a race (mostly led by men) to "fix" the image, then on the other hand, you can look at the early history of photography – such as anotypes and other early processes – as led by women, mostly from their kitchens or domestic spaces. Of course, these early processes were not patented and the images didn't "last" because they ultimately were never fixable. Anotypes disappear. I wonder about the value of this disappearance: what's most important, the art object or the journey to making it? My

students started to understand and question the value of labour beyond the art object. My practice revolves a lot around labour and time and those quiet moments. And, of course, how these are linked to these larger issues. In California, we're just coming off a decade-long drought, and now there's been non-stop rain, and where I lived, in the desert, it was 110 degrees Fahrenheit [43°C]. There was literally ash everywhere because the fires were raging. You would get black ashes falling from the sky, and I was outside thinking about all the dead plants, because you weren't allowed to use water. So, everything is crispy and brown because long before my time, the people who lived here planted plants that were not suitable for this warm climate.

- C. D. M. None of it can really survive ...
- T. K. None of it can really survive without a lot of water, and so now we understand that living here actually requires desert landscaping. This makes me think that I used to have a little "dream desk" behind my bed; I would get up and immediately write my dreams down. And if I couldn't remember them, I would just write about what was outside my window every day. I actually now have 750 pages of dream writing interspersed with what's outside my window. At the time, I was reading a lot of Bernadette Mayer and Octavia Butler.
- C. D. M. Do you consider that form of writing distinct from your eco-poetry?
- T. K. I think it *is* all eco-poetry. It's observational, ritualistic, thinking about what's right there, what you can engage with right in front of you every day. Outside my window was a Chinese elm tree; I wrote about this elm tree every day over a period of one year thinking about the changes, trying to track the time of a tree in daily writing. I was thinking about the time of a tree versus the time of a human.
- C. D. M. Yes, it feels important to be aware of these different, natural cycles of time, as an alternative to the unrelenting march of capitalist time that we're all subjected to. I'm doing a project at the moment in the Landes forest in southern France, which is the biggest production forest in Europe. There they also talk about "forest time" and "human time", but as everything gets faster and there's pressure to maximize and increase timber yield, this supposedly universal "forest time" is actually changing at the hands of humans. The foresters are cutting earlier, they're planting sooner.



Shot at Dawn, 2014
© Chloe Dewe Mathews

Private James Graham
07:22 / 21.12.1915

Private John Docherty
07:12 / 15.02.1916

Private John Jones
Time unknown / 24.2.1916

Private Arthur Dale
Time unknown / 3.3.1916

Private C. Lewis
Time unknown / 11.3.1916

Private Anthony O'Neill
Time unknown / 30.4.1916

Private John William Hasemore
04:25 / 12.5.1916

Private J. Thomas
Time unknown / 20.5.1916

Private William Henry Burrell
Time unknown / 22.5.1916

Private Edward A. Card
Time unknown / 22.9.1916

Private C. Welsh
Time unknown / 6.3.1918

Former Abattoir, Mazingarbe,
Nord-Pas-de-Calais

Shot at Dawn was commissioned by the Ruskin School of Art at the University of Oxford as part of 14-18 NOW, WW1 Centenary Art Commissions

You've also talked about engaging with nature as a way to access earlier ways of being or knowing or Indigenous wisdom (as well as being an antidote to all these other things we've been discussing). I wondered if you could talk a little bit about which forms of knowledge you're accessing and why that's important for you.

- T. K. When I first went back to Peru, my sister taught me this ceremony called a "despacho ceremony". We did it in the Andes together. There's a lot of ayahuasca retreats there and a lot of white people going there to get in touch with their inner self, as a spiritual journey of sorts. My relationship with Peru is different and complex: I was born there but I'm an orphan. I was adopted when I was just a baby. My book *El Jardín de Senderos Que Se Bifurcan* (Dais Books, 2021), was a 10 year project about this period where I went back to Peru for the first time and began to unravel my relationship with the land, with the ideas of orphanhood. It's hard to be in Peru because I look like everyone else and I feel like I'm from there, but I also feel like a stranger: a complete outsider. The poet Monica Youn talks beautifully about the poetics of difference and the poetics of deracination. My book engages with such questions: how one feels connected, what is home, what is ancestry, what does it mean to belong and what does it mean to embrace this idea of difference and transience as home. I think a lot about immigrants that feel the same sense of longing for their ancestral homes, but with the inability to go back or to claim a place.
- C. D. M. Or to feel connected once you get there, presumably?
- T. K. Yes, exactly. But your original question was, how am I engaging with these other ways or forms of knowing, right? For me, it's an attempt. During the ritual, my sister unfolded a white paper cloth and then made offerings to Mother Earth, to the mountains and to the air; she was laying food and plants on white paper, saying prayers, then folding the paper and finally burning what was inside. In another ritual, you bury the paper. It reminded me so much of early photography and camera-less processes. So I think of these early photographic processes – such as anotypes – as ritualistic, a way for me, as an artist, to feel connected to these Indigenous ceremonies.
- C. D. M. You title those works as offerings for your sister, and I wondered whether that's a very specific dedication, or whether you're thinking about a much wider audience too?
- T. K. My literal sister taught me that ritual, but for the title I was thinking of "sister" as my ancestors, but also paying homage to women artists who I think of as my "art ancestors". My work demands an attention to the natural

world and being present with the natural world, being alongside it, and it was women artists who understood this like Agnes Martin, Laura Aguilar and Ana Mendieta. I think these women understood embodied presence, and they paved the way for a different kind of engagement with the land.

- C. D. M. Yes, completely.
- T. K. So when I think of my work as landscape photographs, I mean that they come from this history but also from within the body, that's what I mean when I mention embodied presence. This, of course, echoes Mendieta's practice and the idea of looking downward versus looking out towards the horizon. It's about thinking about what's beneath our feet – in direct contact with the earth. It made me think of the difference between Ansel Adams' vistas and Ana's work. She's pressing her body, insisting on a kind of presence in the earth, much like petroglyphs. My cyanotypes were a way to call on or pay homage to these women.
- C. D. M. When you talk about Mendieta looking downward versus Adams looking towards the horizon, Nan Shepherd comes to mind. Shepherd was a Scottish nature writer and poet, best known for a book called *The Living Mountain*, which although she wrote during the Second World War wasn't published until the 1970s. She was a passionate walker, who famously talked about going *into the mountain* as opposed to on to it or over it, setting out a very different kind of relationship with the landscape from the traditionally Western male impulse of reaching the highest peaks and conquering lands. That leads me back to thinking about a direct physical connection with the earth and natural materials, in terms of these processes that you've been using. In this issue of the magazine, we've been talking to various artists who are also challenging the photographic process, whether that's in the form of using organic matter rather than toxic chemicals to create images, or focusing on low-waste alternatives, or even creating solar-powered websites – all ways to be more environmentally conscious, but specifically bringing that into our art practices. It seems like there's this really wonderful kind of slip-and-slide between your life, your thinking and your practice. Is that something that's always been there, or is that something that's evolved more recently?
- T. K. I think it's always been there because I use my body as a research tool. My work stems from thinking about my life and my lived experience. I call the series "Automatic Rocks/Dark Constellations" and "Automatic Rocks/Excavation" as a dialogue with the history of photography and the history of women's writing. And these processes are also connected to the way that the Surrealists would write and access their

- subconscious minds. But I'm using these historical references to then build my own processes and ways of working. So I'm not really interested in dream interpretation or accessing the subconscious mind, I'm much more interested in dreaming as my ancestors thought of dreams, as belonging to the land. They belong to a larger community, including the dead. There are demands on artists of colour to speak for their communities, to have their work be situated within a kind of identity politics, and I don't think that my work is located there. I think it draws from my lived experience and from my complex identity with Indigeneity, with being a transracial adoptee. It speaks to larger sorts of social, political or historical questions. So, my work has always stemmed from thinking about my body and placing my body.
- C. D. M. You're talking a lot about your body and the land and its connection to it. With the magazine, we're thinking about that but in terms of a destructive human relationship, as opposed to a productive, nurturing, caring relationship with the land. And I end up asking the big questions like: "What can we artists do?" "How does our work and how does the artist's mind and the artist's practice become useful or partake in these questions, particularly now, around the climate crisis?" I wondered whether you feel that's your role, and what role we play, or whether it's about doing something much more personal, just reassessing your own balance with these small things around you.
- T. K. As an educator, I think it's important to raise these questions, because students want to make art that means something in the world and they want the artwork to "make direct change" in the world. However, I just don't think art necessarily works that way. It's much slower. Much more complex. Artists are not NGOs. I think it's important to question the role of art, but I also think the idea of art as activism can be limiting. Also, there's so much demand on artists of colour, to not only make our art, but also to heal the world; for that reason, I'm not interested in being an activist or healing the world.
- C. D. M. That's really interesting you say that.
- T. K. I think that there are people that do that way better: outside or within the arts. But I don't think that "good art" necessarily also does "good" in the world. For me, and for my practice, I'm much more interested in poetry than the realm of activism. Things that I do in my life and in my practice are distinct. There are things that I do that are service and activism, and they may influence my thinking and teaching, but service and activism is not my art.
- C. D. M. I'm reminded of when I was making "Shot at Dawn", a project documenting the sites of execution of men killed for "cowardice" and "desertion" during the First World War. I was exploring how landscapes could somehow hold these memories. During the making of the project, I was talking to this woman who kept saying, "You artists, you can help us see the world differently. You can make us think differently." And I remember thinking, that's such a responsibility. And, is it true? As if artists were magicians, which feels more like mythology than reality.
- T. K. I think to build a practice, one must be resistant to the trends of the art world. One can't just make work in response to a particular moment, because the art world is changing so fast and the market demands are different from month to month. I do see my students making great work that I would characterize also as activism. Many of my students are interested in the water crisis in California, and it's a really timely issue. They're dedicated to making work that's part-documentary, part-research and part-activism. I teach students how to do this work, and how to make the work *they* want to make. I support them in coming to terms with the role of their *own* art making. However, my own art practice has never been "issue-driven", and the role of the photographic document in my work is much more connected to speculation. I'm a little bit more cynical about art and what I see as the demands on us, particularly artists of colour, to heal the world, and yes, shoulder that kind of responsibility. It's hard enough to sustain our practice, to be present, to live in the world as it is, and still make art at all. It's an act of hope.