

Resonating with Nature: George Sand's Feminine Aesthetic in the Contemporary Art

By Jovana Stokic

This essay delves into the evocative realm of George Sand's literary and artistic expressions of nature, uncovering her unique feminine sensitivity to the natural world. It explores Sand's profound connection with nature, her rebellion against societal norms, and her pioneering role in feminist and ecological discourses. By drawing parallels with modern and contemporary women artists, we witness the enduring reverberations of Sand's vision and how her legacy continues to inspire progressive feminist and ecological thought.

George Sand, a trailblazing 19th-century French writer and artist, was a maverick in her time. Beyond her literary prowess, Sand possessed a remarkable affinity for nature, channeling it into her works of art with unparalleled feminine sensitivity. This essay examines Sand's emotional pastoral, examining her deep-rooted connection with nature, her defiance of gender norms, and her contributions to feminist and ecological dialogues. Moreover, it uncovers the echoes of Sand's vision in the works of modern and contemporary women artists, highlighting the enduring legacy of her feminine aesthetic.

This examination reveals George Sand's enduring impact as a proto-feminist figure whose beliefs and actions resonate with modern and contemporary women artists. By defying societal constraints, these artists continue the legacy of questioning and challenging traditional roles while redefining the boundaries of identity, agency, and expression.



George Sand, *Mountainous Landscape with a Lake*, Watercolor on paper, 4 3/16 x 5 3/8 inches

Sand's Visions of Nature

George Sand's visions of nature in her literary and visual oeuvre can be seen through an ecofeminist lens, challenging conventional interpretations of her relationship with the natural world. While she is often associated with bucolic idealism, this perspective can oversimplify her complex engagement with nature. By shifting the focus from Sand's depictions of idyllic fields to her representations of powerful natural phenomena like volcanoes, it becomes evident that her connection to the environment carries deeper political implications tied to her commitment to dismantling gender-based oppression. Sand's portrayal of volcanoes, for instance, connects her to the arch-Romantic ideals of transcendence and reverie, aligning her with the sublime and reinforcing her multifaceted approach to nature that extends beyond mere pastoralism.

George Sand's pastoralism, as depicted in her novels, is characterized by her deep connection to the natural world and her ability to weave the beauty and symbolism of rural landscapes into her narratives. Sand often used pastoral settings as a backdrop for her stories, emphasizing the simplicity and harmony of rural life. Her novels frequently feature idyllic countryside scenes, farms, and villages, which serve as both a physical setting and a reflection of her characters' emotional and moral landscapes. One of the key elements of Sand's pastoralism is her celebration of the rural and agrarian way of life. She portrays the countryside as a place of authenticity, where individuals can live in harmony with nature and escape the corrupting influences of urban society. In her novels, the natural world often plays a central role, with vivid descriptions of landscapes, seasons, and the rhythms of rural life. Sand's characters find solace and inspiration in the beauty of the countryside, and the natural environment serves as a source of renewal and healing. Sand's pastoralism also carries a strong social and political dimension. Through her portrayal of rural communities and their challenges in her novels, she tackles issues related to class, gender, and social justice." She uses the pastoral setting to critique the inequalities and injustices of her time, advocating for social reform and a more equitable society. This vision is intertwined with her exploration of love and relationships. She often depicts the countryside as a space where characters can experience profound emotional connections and personal growth. The pastoral setting allows her characters to escape societal conventions and explore their innermost desires and identities. Sand's pastoralism encompasses her reverence for nature, her critique of society, and her belief in importance of emotions. This worldview defines her, along with Victor Hugo, as a special figure of the 19th century.



Left: **George Sand**,
Common Thistle, 1848
Watercolor and
collage on paper
7¼ x 4¾ in.

Right: **Anna Atkins**,
Cystoseira ericoides,
1843, Cyanotype
impression, Spencer
Collection, The New
York Public Library.

Natural Images

George Sand's engagement with botanical subjects, particularly her drawings and collages of plants, reveals her distinctive approach to merging art and nature. Sand employed a merging of traditional artistic methods to create her botanical artworks. In parallel, **Anna Atkins (1799-1871)**, a pioneering British botanist and photographer, made her mark during the same era through groundbreaking work in cyanotype photography, particularly her cyanotypes of plants, which marked a revolutionary moment in the history of botany and photography. Despite their geographical separation, both women challenged conventions of their time and left lasting legacies that continue to resonate with contemporary artists and scholars. Unlike cyanotype photography, which aimed for scientific accuracy, Sand's botanical art leaned toward artistic interpretation. Her drawings and collages often highlight the aesthetic qualities of plants, emphasizing their shapes, textures, and colors. This artistic approach allowed Sand to infuse her botanical subjects with a sense of vitality and beauty, transcending scientific representation. Her botanical art can be seen as an extension of her broader artistic sensibility, which often incorporated elements of the natural world into her literary works, and as a visual manifestation of her deep connection to nature, echoing the pastoral themes prevalent in her literature.

While Atkins revolutionized botanical illustration with her pioneering cyanotypes, George Sand's botanical drawings and collages offer a different perspective—an artistic celebration of nature's aesthetics and an embodiment of her romantic and pastoral sensibilities. Pioneering the innovative medium of cyanotype photography in a male-dominated field, Atkins demonstrated a feminist spirit by challenging the traditional boundaries of both science and art during an era when opportunities for women were severely limited. Both women contributed significantly to the different media that were new territories to claim outside of patriarchal authority.



Eugene Delacroix, *Portrait of George Sand*, 1834
Oil on canvas
Musée Delacroix, 2016-1

Sand's Self-Performance

Sand's persona construction, including her cross-dressing and use of a male pseudonym, foreshadows the self-performative nature of many contemporary artists. Sand's rebellion against gender norms was as remarkable as her literary talent. By adopting a male pseudonym and dressing in men's clothing, she defied the constraints. Sand's unorthodox approach to self-expression, characterized by her cross-dressing and free-spirited lifestyle, served as a pioneering influence in shaping the contemporary feminist exploration of subjectivity. This exploration of identity resonates with the work of Surrealist French artist **Claude Cahun**, who, like Sand, utilized self-representation to transcend traditional gender roles. Many contemporary artists expand Sand's spirit of irreverence as a way to acquire freedom from societal pressures. By dressing as a man and perfecting an expression that allowed her to blend in unnoticed, she could move about and observe without being observed. She found this invisibility miraculous and profoundly inspiring:

“I was no longer confined to the role of a woman or a man. I was merely a presence jostled on the city's sidewalks, an inconspicuous obstacle to the hurried pedestrians. It didn't bother me; I had no particular agenda. No one recognized me, no one glanced in my direction, and no one stopped me. I was an insignificant particle adrift in the vast crowd of the city.”¹

¹ Quoted in Belinda Jack, "George Sand's boots," *Aeon*, last modified November 22, 2021, <https://aeon.co/essays/how-aurore-dudevant-put-on-mens-boots-to-become-george-sand>.

Sand's unchaperoned adventures through Paris, in her small metal-heeled liberating boots, symbolized her escape from societal constraints, and in this newfound guise, she experienced the exhilarating freedom of anonymity.

Patti Smith as a modern-day Sand punk heroine

Patti Smith and George Sand, despite belonging to different times and artistic movements, share a remarkable parallel in their irreverence for gender norms and their lyrical expressions, embodying a punk-like spirit that transcends convention. In the 19th century, Sand effectively challenged the rigid gender norms of her era, as she embraced a form of gender fluidity that allowed her to navigate society with the freedom of a young man, a bold rejection of the constraints placed on women. Sand's unapologetic embrace of this unconventional lifestyle was nothing short of revolutionary, and set her apart as a trailblazer in challenging traditional gender roles. In the late 20th and early 21st century, Patti Smith carried forward this tradition of defiance. Her androgynous appearance, coupled with her refusal to conform to traditional ideas of femininity, epitomizes a punk-inspired irreverence for gender norms. Smith's music, poetry, and visual art consistently challenged conventional expectations of how women should behave and present themselves. Her distinctive style and persona became a symbol of independence and a rejection of societal constraints.

Sand's ability to weave intricate narratives and evoke deep emotions in her readers underscores her connection to the world of lyrical expression. Patti Smith, on the other hand, is renowned for her contributions to music and poetry, as well as her intimate paintings and drawings, all of which are characterized by their lyrical depth. Smith's lyrics are a testament to poetic prowess, filled with raw, emotive language that captures the essence of the punk movement's emotional intensity. Sand's defiance extended beyond gender norms. She was a fiercely independent thinker who challenged societal expectations in her writing and personal life at a time when such ideas were met with resistance. Her work embodies a spirit of defiance against social constraints, echoing the values of independence and self-expression. Smith's punk attitude is also synonymous with defiance and independence. Her music and writings are marked by a rebellious spirit that questions authority, challenges conventions, and encourages self-discovery. Her approach to her art and her life aligns seamlessly with the core values of the punk movement, making her an icon of independence and artistic authenticity.

Both women, separated by centuries and artistic mediums made contributions to art and culture which reflect a timeless spirit of rebellion and self-expression, making them enduring figures in the world of nonconformist creativity.



George Sand,
Natural Archway to the Sea
 Watercolor on paper
 4 9/16 x 6 1/16 in.

Fantasy Landscapes in Surrealism

We can draw another parallel in 20TH century Surrealist fantasy landscapes to Sand's particular, idealized (“dentric”) visions of nature. **Max Ernst (1891-1976)**, a prominent Surrealist artist, is celebrated for his innovative techniques, notably decalcomania and frottage. In the realm of landscape art, these methods allowed him to liberate creativity and tap into the subconscious. Decalcomania, a technique which involves pressing paint between pieces of paper to create images with dreamlike patterns, and frottage, which creates textures by rubbing paper against surfaces, offered Ernst a way to set his imagination free within the landscape, aligning his work with Surrealism's basic aim of unearthing hidden creative realms. His partner **Leonora Carrington**, also a Surrealist artist, was known for creating fantastical, dreamlike landscapes that defy the boundaries of reality, and are filled with bizarre creatures, magical elements, and distorted perspectives. Carrington's works transport viewers into a world of imagination and symbolism, where the laws of nature are suspended, and the subconscious takes center stage. Her landscapes are rich in narrative and symbolism, inviting viewers to delve into the depths of the psyche and explore the mysteries of the unconscious mind in an echo of Sand's deep connection with the natural world. Her visions of nature were imbued with a sense of awe, wonder, and emotional resonance. Her sensibility allowed her to infuse nature with human emotions and to see the landscape as a reflection of the inner self. For Sand, nature was not just a backdrop but a source of inspiration and introspection. When comparing Carrington's fantasy landscapes to Sand's Romantic visions of nature, we can see some intriguing parallels. Both artists transcend the boundaries of reality and conventional representations of the landscape. They both invite viewers to question the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious, the external and internal worlds. While Carrington's landscapes are often filled with bizarre and dreamlike elements, Sand's landscapes are characterized by emotional depth and a sense of the

dreamy communion with the natural world. They challenge conventional perceptions of reality and encourage us to explore the profound connection between the human psyche and the world around us. They remind us that the landscape, whether fantastical or rooted in the real world, can serve as a powerful canvas for expression and a gateway to deeper understanding, and this is at the core of any ecological consciousness.



Kiki Smith, *Healers*,
2018
Etching on Hahnemühle
copperplate white paper
24-1/2" × 29-7/8 in.
Published by Thirteen
Moons; Edition of 24 +
6 AP + 3 TP + 4 PP, No.
71267.24

© Kiki Smith, courtesy Pace
Gallery
Photo: Tom Barratt, courtesy
Pace Gallery

Echoes in Contemporary Art

This essay concludes by examining some of the resonances of George Sand's vision in the works contemporary women artists. From **Kiki Smith's** dreamlike landscapes to **Jenny Holzer's** thought-provoking use of language, we witness how Sand's emotional pastoral finds echoes in the art of today. It seems fitting to emphasize the enduring impact of Sand's feminine sensitivity to nature, as we shed a perspective on her contributions in expanding freedom to see the world from a highly individual standpoint, unorthodox by its not being tethered to societal norms, but acutely aware of the need to push for social justice.

This brings us back to the small format of her watercolors that abstractly capture this desire for freedom, in representation, and beyond. Sand's primary medium, watercolor, offered transparency and unpredictability due to adjustments in the water-to-pigment ratio, resulting in deep colors, captivating light effects, and spontaneous reactions. This medium's history spanned Eastern and Western traditions, with renowned artists employing it for various purposes. George Sand's mastery of

watercolor allowed her to merge subjectivity, imagination, interpretation, and the fluidity of water, that flows freely.²

Echoing the romanticism found in Sand's imaginary and intimate landscapes, **Kiki Smith** offers a contemporary interpretation that weaves dreamlike elements and intricate botanical imagery into her artistic vision of the natural world. Smith's artistic sensibility in her work on nature is multifaceted, spanning dreamlike and surreal landscapes that transport viewers to otherworldly realms. Her works often feature intricate botanical elements, with flowers and plants becoming recurring motifs, exploring themes of growth and decay. Drawing inspiration from mythology and folklore, Smith weaves narratives that incorporate mythical creatures and symbolism into her landscapes. Some of her scenes are set within interior spaces, offering glimpses into domestic environments where the natural world interacts with human life, exploring themes of memory and personal narratives. Smith's landscapes also take on abstract and symbolic qualities, inviting viewers to interpret deeper emotions and concepts. Animals, both real and mythical, often inhabit her landscapes. The artist uses the natural world as a metaphor for human experiences, such as the passage of time, transformation, or the relationship between the self and the external environment. These diverse approaches showcase Smith's versatility as an artist and her ability to explore a wide range of themes and emotions through her interpretations of the natural world, echoing the Romantic freedom we sense in Sand's visions.

Sand's Progressive Ideas of Social Justice

Jenny Holzer is a renowned contemporary artist known for her use of language as a primary medium. Her work often involves displaying text-based messages in public spaces, provoking thought and engaging viewers in discourse. Holzer's art addresses themes of power, politics, gender violence, and human rights. She has used her art as a form of activism, shedding light on pressing social issues and challenging authority. Holzer's iconic LED displays and public installations have made her a significant figure in the world of contemporary art and social commentary. George Sand and Jenny Holzer lived in vastly different time periods and worked in different mediums, there are connecting threads between their contributions to art and literature. Both women challenged societal norms and expectations through their work. Sand defied gender roles and advocated for women's rights through her novels, embodying the spirit of feminism in the 19th century. Holzer, on the other hand, uses language as a tool for activism, confronting contemporary issues head-on and inspiring discourse.

² For this, see excellent article on Sand's use of watercolors. Emilie Sitzia, "Watercolours and Dendrites, Lakes and Seascapes: Water in George Sand's Visual Art." In *Water Imagery in George Sand's Work*, pp. 213–36. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.

Both Sand and Holzer leveraged their artistic platforms to engage with important social and political themes. Sand's novels addressed topics such as class struggle and the oppression of women, while Holzer's art often critiques power structures and calls for social change. They both harnessed their creative talents to effect change and spark conversations about the world around them. These two women artists, though separated by time and medium, share a commitment to challenging norms, advocating for social justice, and using their art as a vehicle for change. We can continue to draw parallels with modern and contemporary feminist artists who draw inspiration from Sand's pioneering journey and employ their diverse artistic expressions to challenge norms and advocate for equality.

Jovana Stokic

Jovana Stokic is a Belgrade-born, New York-based art historian and curator. She is currently on the faculty of the MFA Art Practice, School of Visual Arts, New York, and New York University Steinhardt Department of Art and Art Professions, and Art History Department, SUNY New Paltz. She holds a PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Stokic is a former fellow at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; a researcher at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the curator of the Kimmel Center Galleries, New York University; and the performance curator at Location One, New York. Co-author of *The Methuen Drama Companion to Performance Art*, which offers a comprehensive guide to the major issues and interdisciplinary debates concerning performance in art contexts that have developed over the last decade; and the essay for 59th Venice Biennale exhibition catalog of Montenegro.