

**ART @ BAINBRIDGE**

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

**Helène Aylon: Undercurrent**

September 14, 2024–February 2, 2025



# Helène Aylon: Undercurrent

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Helène Aylon envisioned her art as a form of exploration without end. Instead of fixed and immutable forms, she created situations in which change was possible, even inevitable. Over the course of her fifty-year career, Aylon articulated an abstract feminist lexicon across a surprisingly wide range of media. She first gained recognition in the 1970s for her innovative contributions to a movement called Process art, which privileges the act of creation over the final object. Her receptive and open-ended approach to materials extended to her ecofeminist actions of the 1980s, when she collaborated with dozens of women from the art world and beyond to oppose the nuclear arms race in performances that took place across the United States and abroad. In the final decades of Aylon's life, she turned her gaze to her Orthodox Jewish upbringing. She sought—without necessarily expecting to succeed—to redeem ancient texts and practices for herself and for other women by reinterpreting them through a feminist lens. *Helène Aylon: Undercurrent* presents works dating from the 1970s to the 2010s, which are unified by the themes of openness and resilience.

Rachel Federman  
Guest Curator

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## GALLERY 1

*Silvery Pane* is among Aylon's earliest works. It belongs to the series *Elusive Silver*, in which the artist painted on layered sheets of Plexiglas and aluminum. Consistent with her aversion to definitive statements in her work, there is no single ideal vantage from which to view this work; rather, its appearance changes depending on lighting conditions and the position of the viewer. Created forty years later, *My Eternal Light: The Illuminated Pink Dash* is Aylon's version of the inextinguishable lamp that hangs in every synagogue. She described the "delicate pink dash" as a summation of her "striving for the inclusion of women. It is what has been missing since Abraham discovered monotheism."<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in 1990, Aylon looked back at her childhood and early adulthood in Orthodox Jewish communities in Brooklyn and, briefly, in Montreal, as a rabbi's wife. She began highlighting passages of divine and human cruelty in the five Books of Moses with a pink marker. Working by candlelight, she inserted a vertical line wherever the feminine presence was absent, laying her marks on a translucent sheet placed over each page. She thus was respectful of a religious prohibition against marking the text even as she added her own commentary to those of medieval scholars, all men. Rather than condemn foundational texts to the dustbin of history, Aylon engaged with them discursively in order to "liberate God," as she put it, from what she viewed as the misogynistic projections of the men who wrote them.



**The Book That Will Not Close,**  
from the installation **Epilogue:**  
**Alone with My Mother**, 1999  
Book of Moses with vellum pages  
interleaved and pink marker



**Silvery Pane**, from the series  
**Elusive Silver**, 1971  
Acrylic on Plexiglas and aluminum



**My Eternal Light: The  
Illuminated Pink Dash**, 2011  
Wood, paint, electrical  
wiring, bulb

## GALLERY 2

In the late 1970s, the anti-nuclear movement galvanized Aylon to adapt her art toward activist ends. She developed a multivalent metaphor that would shape her practice during the 1980s: against the threat of nuclear war, she enlisted the “sac”—a deliberate misspelling of “sack”—in the form of a pillowcase, as a tool of survival. The pillowcase was a symbol of vulnerability—a place of rest—as well as of resilience. Aylon said, “Looking at news photos of refugees, there are always images of women fleeing with a ‘sac’ of precious belongings in one hand, a child clasping the other hand. We, too, would take our most precious belonging—the Earth itself . . . in our ‘sac,’ and carry it to safety.”<sup>2</sup>

In the spring of 1982, in an action she called *Terrestri: “Rescued” Earth*, Aylon organized a dozen women to embark on a six-week journey in a truck she transformed into a work called *Earth Ambulance* and an accompanying van.

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Between Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California and a mass rally for disarmament at the United Nations in New York City, the “Women’s SAC Caravan” stopped at twelve Strategic Air Command military bases. Aylon’s use of the acronym “SAC” denotes both Strategic Air Command and the mantra “survive and continue.” At each site, members of the caravan were joined by local participants to gather earth in sacks that women had inscribed with their dreams and nightmares for the planet. Once filled, the pillowcases were carried to the *Earth Ambulance* on decommissioned army stretchers and transported to the next site. At the journey’s end, the sacks were emptied near the United Nations and the stretchers raised like sentinels, or funerary monuments.

In 1985, forty years after the United States dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Aylon traveled to Japan to interview female *hibakusha*, survivors of the bombings. She asked them to inscribe pillowcases with their memories of the war. Eight years later, she knotted together hundreds of sacks from this event and others to form ropes that dangled along the exterior walls of the Knoxville Art Museum in *Bridge of Knots*. It was the first of several iterations of this work, which has been reimagined for Bainbridge House using original ropes.



Reimagination of **Bridge of Knots**, 1993/1995/2006  
Ropes of knotted pillowcases,  
with marker  
Illustrated: **Bridge of Knots** at  
Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley,  
CA, 1995



**Terrestri: “Rescued” Earth  
(Earth Ambulance)**, 1982  
Black and white print



**Terrestri: "Rescued" Earth  
(Sunrise Departure),**  
May 2, 1982  
Chromogenic print



**Terrestri: "Rescued" Earth  
(Filling the Pillowcase),** 1982  
Chromogenic print



**Terrestri: "Rescued" Earth  
(Inside the Earth Ambulance),**  
1982  
Chromogenic print



**Terrestri: "Rescued" Earth  
(Rescued Earth),** June 12, 1982  
Black and white print



**Terrestri: "Rescued" Earth  
(Earth "Paintings" in front of  
the Isaiah Wall, Ralph Bunche  
Park, New York),**  
June 12, 1982  
Black and white print

**Stretched Canvas, 1989**

Paint, canvas, wood poles (three stretchers from an installation of 12 painted and 12 unpainted army stretchers at P.S.1, Long Island City, NY)

**Weaving, 1989**

Straps from army stretchers, painted canvas

**GALLERY 3**

Following the *Elusive Silver* series (1969–73; seen in the first gallery in Bainbridge House), which built contingency into the viewer's experience of her work, Aylon went further by embedding unpredictability and evolution into the act of creation itself. "I wanted the art to tell me something I did not know," she said. She recalled making *Untitled* and *Oval Form with Diagonal Furrow*, "I painted from behind the surface of the paper, allowing the oils to seep through naturally, in their own time, outside of my doing. I'd wait for the image to manifest on the front through chance—absorption—and I would accept the outcome." Pressed between a Masonite panel and a sheet of Plexiglas, the oil-soaked paper became richer and more beautiful

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with time. Aylon recognized the resulting forms as “the handwriting of the universe,” linking the processes that created them to aging bodies and earth cracking beneath the sun’s rays.

A sense of openness similarly attends *I Look into the Passages*. Each small box contains a scriptural text that is magnified, emphasizing a willingness—even a desire—to receive comfort and wisdom from a problematic biblical passage. *I Will Wait for the Landing* and *Dune Grass, Dark Horizon* belong to a series of self-portraits Aylon began in 2008, after a medical event that nearly ended her life. Wrapped in robes and multiplied in each image, she embodies the ancient foremothers whose stories she sought in scripture but did not find. “Somehow, remembering the foremothers and designating myself as a future foremother consoled me,” she said. This series of portraits, called *Turnings*, encapsulates Aylon’s acceptance of physical and spiritual evolution, of “the melodrama of looking forward and looking back simultaneously.” The *Turnings* draw together the three major themes of Aylon’s career as she designated them: Body, Earth, God.



**Sixteen Bricks: First and Second Telling, 2014**  
Mixed-media diptych on paper



**Oval Form with Diagonal Furrow, from the series Pouring Formations, 1979**  
Linseed oil on paper, mounted on Masonite with Plexiglas  
Collection of Nathaniel Fisch, Princeton, New Jersey





**Untitled**, from the series  
**Paintings That Change in Time**, ca. 1973

Linseed oil on paper, mounted  
on Masonite with Plexiglas  
Collection of Nathaniel Fisch,  
Princeton, New Jersey



**Watercolors:**  
**Hiroshima/Nagasaki**, 1990

Watercolor on two sheets  
of paper



**I Will Wait for the Landing**,  
from the series **Turnings**, 2014  
Chromogenic print mounted  
on board



**Dune Grass, Dark Horizon**  
from the series **Turnings**, 2015  
Chromogenic print mounted  
on board



**I Look into the Passages**, 2003  
Wood, paper, magnifying glass  
lens (9 boxes from a series of 74)

## GALLERY 4

When Aylon visited Japan in 1985 to interview *hibakusha*, she enlisted local students to participate in the performance *Current: 2 sacs en route*, floating two sacks containing seeds, pods, and grains—ingredients of survival—along the Kamo River. “It was as though the world would start over again,” Aylon later said.<sup>3</sup> The sacks’ journey is recounted in *Two sacs en route*, a video that was shown in Times Square in 1995 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The screening coincided with the installation of *Bridge of Knots* at the Berkeley Art Museum (seen in the second gallery in Bainbridge House). The video *Bridge of Knots* records an earlier installation of the piece at the Knoxville Art Museum in Tennessee. In Aylon’s generative practice, each work or action is linked to the next; as in her chain of knotted pillowcases, there is no completion, only process.



**Two sacs en route**, 1995  
Video; 2:05 minutes (duration)



**Bridge of Knots**, 1993  
Video; 6:47 minutes (duration)  
Music composed and performed  
by Meredith Monk  
Excerpts from “Prairie Ghost” and  
“Silo” from *Songs from the Hill*  
© 1976 Meredith Monk /  
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*Helène Aylon: Undercurrent* is guest curated by Rachel Federman.

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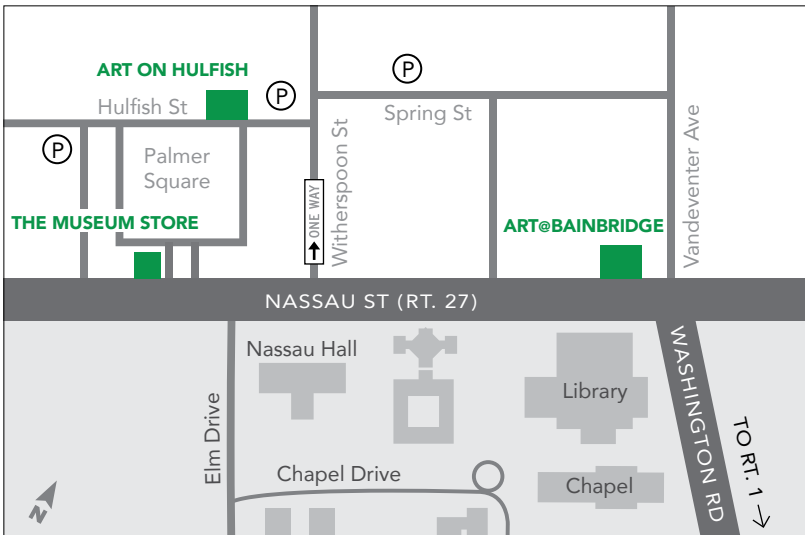
<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotes by Helène Aylon are from her memoir, *Whatever Is Contained Must Be Released: My Jewish Orthodox Girlhood, My Life as a Feminist Artist* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Helène Aylon, "The S.A.C. / SAC Voyage of the Earth Ambulance," *Women Eco Artists Dialog* 5, Atomic Legacy Art (May 2012), <https://directory.weadartists.org/the-earth-ambulance>.

<sup>3</sup> Helène Aylon, interview by Peter Samis, January 9, 2008 (unpublished transcript). Courtesy of Peter Samis.

Art@Bainbridge is a gallery project of the Princeton University Art Museum, located in historic Bainbridge House in downtown Princeton. Please also visit Art on Hulfish, our photo-forward gallery and programs space in Palmer Square, open daily through January 5, 2025. Our main building is under construction as we build a bold new Museum, anticipated to open in 2025. Visit our website for online exhibitions, videos, live programs, and more.

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