



## *Mount Saint Helens*

by Linda Endersby, Registrar, Curator of Collections

**O**n May 18, 1980, the Mount St. Helens volcano in Washington state erupted. Fifty-seven people died, and the volcano blast caused \$1.1 billion in damage. Hot ash caused forest fires, and snow melt from the top of the mountain caused floods. Volcanic ash spread across the Northwest; more than 900,000 tons of it were eventually cleaned up from areas around Washington. The 1980 eruption was the first eruption in the continental United States outside of Alaska since 1917.

When Christine Montgomery, one of the donors of this print, was an art student at the University of South Dakota (USD), Ellen Lanyon came to campus as part of a program to bring nationally recognized printmakers to the small town of Vermillion. They would create a print, from start to finish, with assistance from the students, who then received a copy of the print. "It was great to work under Ellen," according to Montgomery, "back then getting a chance to hear female artists, especially printmakers, talk about their work was rare." This Mount St. Helens print was created with students at USD after the eruption.



Ellen Lanyon (American, 1926-2013)

*Mount St. Helens May 18 1980*, 1981

Ink print on paper

Gift of Christine Montgomery and Greg Olson (2018.4.1)

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# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

In the 1970s Lanyon moved to New York and joined the women's art movement, which was pushing for greater acknowledgment of women artists and more equitable representation for them in museum exhibitions. They also created what they considered art aimed at social justice, including environmentalism. Lanyon became a member of the Heresies Collective, which produced the journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* (1977-1993). One issue tackled feminism and ecology. While the editorial collective was working on the ecology issue, Mount St Helens erupted, and a photograph of the volcano became the obvious choice for a cover. According to the editorial statement, Mount St Helens was "a connecting image—a hole into the interior and an opening out of that center—both nurturing and destructive . . . the eruption of Mt St. Helens is our symbol of the 'revolt of nature' because we know of the important role feminist *culture* will play in that revolution."

In the 1970s Lanyon, a painter as well as a printmaker, began to produce works based on endangered species—particularly in the Florida Everglades where she visited. But she based her paintings and drawings on photographic images rather than on animals in the wild. Her work reflected on vanishing ecosystems, which, at least to her, were mystical and magical.

After visiting the West, she created a series of straightforward landscapes, then set still-life arrangements of odd objects within landscapes. These became statements about the loss of magical natural environments and the ascendancy of science and technology.

Lanyon has been described as a "visual poet" and is identified with Chicago Imagism. The artist claimed that the incongruous array of imagery in her work reveals an "unintentional Surrealism." Her own description of her artistic process:

*"Source material is central to my process, as I rely upon a method of seek and find (the source) for motivation. Generally, I begin to work by choosing an object and/or a theme and then, by making use of a so-called stream of consciousness approach, I allow the addition and juxtaposition of other, sometimes disassociated, elements to become a part of the narrative. Photographs, my own photo-documentation, nature guides, diverse ephemera, taxidermy, and many eccentric objects constitute my inanimate inspiration, while living flora and fauna and facets of the human condition (often portrayed by hands that can manipulate or control) provide the animate stimulus for my rather conglomerate imagery."*

—Ellen Lanyon, 1999■