

SPRINGS

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ONE WOMAN'S WASTE IS ANOTHER WOMAN'S TREASURE: A
CONVERSATION WITH KIM CURTIS

Kim Curtis and Regina M. Bichler

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*Kim Curtis is a fine artist whose work explores the history of landscape. In moments of insomnia, in order to guarantee herself a positive story, she searches "comeback species" wherever she is located at the time (i.e., "comeback species Puerto Rico"), and always learns something exciting and pleasant enough to allow her to fall back to sleep. Regina M. Bichler is a PhD candidate researching zero-waste cities in Germany and Japan. When travelling Japan, she often takes photos of the creatively and colorfully designed manholes that each city uses to present its characteristics. Together, they discuss the role that waste and the environment play in Kim's art, how her recent project *Regeneration* celebrates environmental victories including "comeback" species, and how success stories motivate us to keep fighting for a better future.*



Kim Curtis, *Regeneration: Early Summer Prairie*, 2025, oil and flashe on canvas, 189 x 155 cm (detail). © Kim Curtis. All rights reserved.

REGINA M. BICHLER (RB): As a researcher on waste and an art lover, it is a real pleasure to look at your works! I admire the deep, bright colors you use in the *Regeneration* series, and how you balance them with darker tones. Could you say a few words about this newest project?

KIM CURTIS (KC): Sure! My new series *Regeneration: Painting the Prairie's Renewal* amplifies environmental success stories, particularly in the US-midwestern prairie where restoration has led to agricultural benefits as well as species comeback. We're in a fugue-state of environmental distress, and I think it's crucial to remind ourselves that many of the investments we've made are paying off. A quick search of "comeback species" in any region yields inspiring results, from salmon making their first run in 60 years up the unblocked Klamath River, to India doubling their tiger

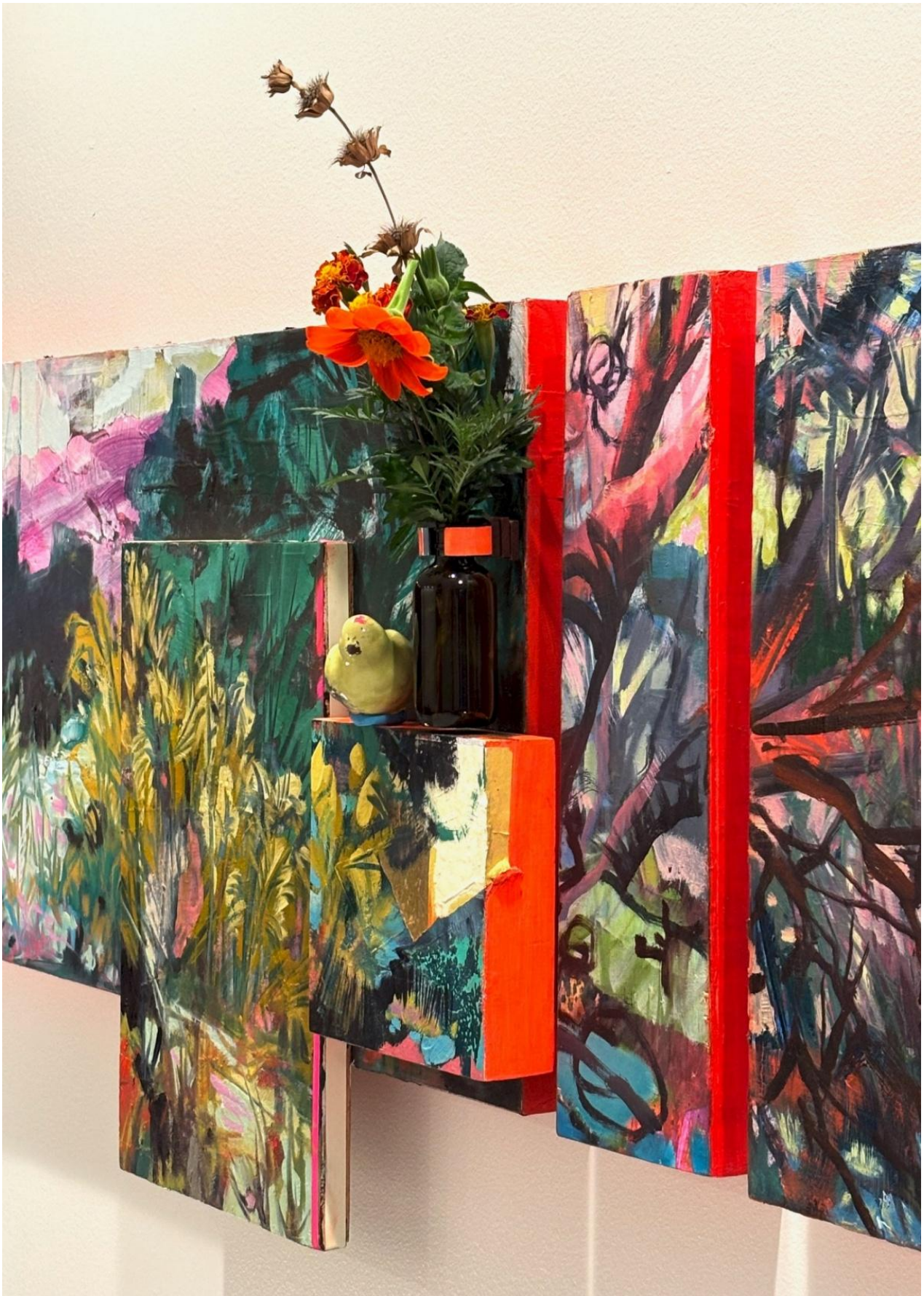
population in a decade. There is much more to do, but *Regeneration* reminds us that our systems do revitalize when allowed and encouraged to do so.



Kim Curtis, *Regeneration: Madison PrairieScape*, 2025, mixed media on multiple panels, 38 x 330 cm. © Kim Curtis. All rights reserved.

RB: My favorite in the *Regeneration* series is *Madison PrairieScape*, which blends the typical two-dimensional oil-on-canvas picture with three-dimensional elements and experiments with spatial arrangement. Could you explain the idea behind this work?

KC: I think what you may be responding to is the game I play with forced adaptation. That particular piece is made up of many irregularly sized and shaped panels, with some sculptural elements added in. The composition and color systems are dictated by the constant introduction of new materials. From the very beginning of the process, I use whatever materials I have at hand: leftover house paint, scrap materials including litter, media I haven't tried before, and I apply them in dis-abled ways: using my non-dominant hand, holding my tools awkwardly, pouring, spraying, layering, erasing.



Kim Curtis, *Regeneration: Madison PrairieScape*, 2025, mixed media on multiple panels, 38 x 330 cm (detail). © Kim Curtis. All rights reserved.

One Woman's Waste Is Another Woman's Treasure: A Conversation with Kim Curtis

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Then I edit whatever happened in that first pass: looking for areas I want to preserve while eradicating others, duplicating marks or passages, finding ways to create tension or harmony. As the imagery starts to develop into a legible landscape, I disrupt its evolution by making more changes: panels may be turned upside-down, re-positioned, or removed, areas are scraped out, things are pried off or nailed on. Then these actions are assessed for visual interest: Should the spill be cleaned up? Should I continue scraping into pristine areas? Should the adjacent areas cohere or remain apart? As an example, if I nail a bright yellow piece of corrugated plastic over what looks like a field of prairie grass, I then need to decide how that synthetic yellow affects the surrounding landscape: Does it spread through the adjacent grass, or will the grass overgrow the new material? At the same time, I'm also playing with rhythm: How do the differently sized panels line up as the landscape travels across the wall? All of these experiments and decisions create the colors you see in the final, oddly formatted piece. Again, this is akin to the way our natural world is transformed by human activity and how landscapes are marked by oddities, both intentional and unintentional. I will say though, that I do have a strong bias: I'm pursuing a story of hope and of beauty in the complexity of destruction and reconstruction. So, my decisions are made from that perspective.

RB: And it works! Despite the use of dark colors, your seemingly impenetrable forests and wild landscapes emanate a sense of hope to me—maybe reflecting the local successes that you just mentioned. Yet in a time of persisting global environmental crises, how can there be hope that we will still swing the wheel around on a global scale?

KC: I don't think we have any choice but to hope. And hope inspires action: It mobilizes investment, and when we truly invest, we succeed. I agree, the overall environmental picture right now is grim, but, for example, when I glance through my inbox, I consistently open one newsletter. It's from *Grist* magazine and the lead is always something positive like, "It's January 14th and Native Americans Are Getting Their Land Back." I open it because I'm immediately curious: What happened? How did they do it? Conversely, the deluge of negative emails overwhelms me, and I start to feel helpless. As a visual storyteller, I want to be part of a campaign that inspires people to move forward—to get outside, explore what we have, and commit to protecting it.

RB: Don't these "small hopes" encourage us to rest on our laurels of such tiny, local successes, suggesting that we are already doing enough for nature?

KC: I think people want to know their investment is paying off. Legions of individuals and organizations work every day as volunteers, climate lawyers, researchers, teachers, artists, activists. . . We need to recognize this painstaking, ongoing labor and celebrate its victories. I don't think celebration encourages people to relax. To the contrary, I think it inspires people to keep going and to go bigger. Wallowing in the negative is the actual danger because situations start to feel futile.

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Yes, we need to be realistic about what we're facing, and I very much appreciate the people who are giving us the hard facts. Those facts lead to specific changes, for example with the US Farm Bill where the federal government, recognizing habitat loss and ecosystem destruction, began paying farmers to restore prairie and wetlands where their fields were unsuitable for row-cropping. Farmers benefited and the immediate environmental recovery (if isolated) should be widely and loudly celebrated: Wildlife returned, drainage improved, soil and water quality increased. Paired with comprehensive agricultural and ecosystem information, these successes give us positive data to fight for more elaborate projects, create stronger partnerships, and to experiment with new approaches.

RB: But if we want more of the good news and successes, shouldn't we be the activists out in the field fighting for the improvement of the environment?

KC: Amplifying well-researched information is key to mitigating any crisis. You and I are using our particular skills to both create our work and help disseminate the work of others. A few years ago, I decided to quit "everything" and dedicate myself to environmental justice and protection. Then I strategized how: What can I bring to an environmental organization? I have baseline office skills and no expertise in law or science. However, I've spent my entire life refining my ability to research and tell stories through visual arts and craft.

Each of us has had the experience of enduring a dry explanation during which important information is lost. This is where the humanities are crucial: persuasive writing, compelling images, dramatic storytelling through music, dance, theater—it's how we move people, both emotionally and physically. Artists and writers are turning research data into exciting and compelling stories. These stories then reverberate through countless retellings. The research you're doing now is instrumental in this process. For example, when I discovered—through your work—the existence of zero-waste cities in Japan, I immediately wanted to know more: Whatever rabbit holes your research sends me down filter into my work, but also into conversations with friends, family, colleagues, and—to your original point—the thousands of people I join in streets and capitals during rallies and protests.

Lastly—and perhaps most tangibly—I donate 10 percent of my sales to an environmental organization ([Prairie Rivers Network](#)) full of lawyers, scientists, and more storytellers who produce concrete results: energy companies forced to responsibly remove toxic coal ash from our floodplain, legislation that protects an aquifer serving over a million people, or collaboration with farmers to reduce fertilizer and pesticide use. Hopefully, both my donation policy and the conversation promoted by my artwork—built on research like yours—inspire more people to invest and mobilize.



Kim Curtis, *Regeneration: Prairie Bouquet*, 2025, mixed media on canvas, 70 x 70 cm (detail). © Kim Curtis. All rights reserved.

RB: It's nice to hear that someone is interested in my research! Coming back to your art, among the materials you are using, there are discarded items that have been classified as waste by others. How do you find value in these items?

KC: I began inserting bright, anomalous items into my paintings many years ago not out of a conservation effort *per se* but because I'd been searching for a way to describe our landscapes as they *truly* are: a layered history of interactions between humans and our environment. Increasingly, I was struck by the marks we humans make and the adaptations we force, many of which we don't recognize because we automatically edit them out: We either don't want to see the spray-painted construction zones and expanded, mismatched structures, or we simply don't appreciate the startling contrast between plastic-wrapped haybales and green farm-fields. I wanted to create a similar process in my work: to force the developing landscape to either adapt to or reject an intrusion and then require myself to manage it. Should I repair it? Ignore it? Remove it and expose the scar? Or should the entire painting shift to absorb it? What can that process and the resulting work reveal to us about what we actually see out in the world, what we know about our histories, and how we

appreciate what we discover when we look closer? For me as an artist, the addition of synthetic “human-made” artifacts brought me to an enhanced depiction of our environment and made for a much more interesting process of challenge, frustration, changing expectations, and discovery of new artistic vocabulary.

RB: The integration of synthetic “human-made” artifacts into your art makes me think of your plastic waste sculpture *Harvest*. What was the process of creating this artwork like?

KC: Sure! About a decade ago here in the US, we had a disturbingly violent cultural moment during which white supremacists terrorized the community of Charlottesville, Virginia due to the planned removal of monuments erected to the slavery-aligned Confederacy. It prompted a national debate over commemoration, and I began examining my own ideas around heroism and public contribution. Researching the history of monuments, I learned that the Greek and Roman roots of the word itself actually translate not to “commemoration” or “celebration” but rather as “to warn” or “to advise.” The plastic waste crisis was becoming increasingly urgent, and the idea of a monumental admonition took hold. Coincidentally, I’d been paging through some hunting magazines, thinking about plastic in forest animals, when I realized the discarded Christmas reindeer I’d found along the road years prior would be an excellent central hero: its cavity an ideal container for brightly colored detritus and blinking lights. It still functioned, swaying its head back and forth, making it a compelling ambassador for the concept of *Harvest*.



Kim Curtis, *Harvest: A Monument to Plastic*. 2022, reclaimed Styrofoam, wood, plastics, lights, solar panel, and battery. © Kim Curtis. All rights reserved.

At our Styrofoam recycling center, I scavenged piles of packing material to build that fluted pilaster and oddly cobbled columns. I continued litter-collecting and dumpster-diving for the rest: Those silver Corinthian capitals are the linings of coffee bags, surrounded by all sorts of colorful toys, party favors, sushi grass, vegetable netting, and so on. The idea was to make it celebratory enough

to attract viewers who would then engage further: A QR code still links to a page on my website where people can register to vote, contact their legislators, and read more about plastic and the fossil fuel industry's reliance on it as their "Plan B." The monument was placed in front of a last small portion of prairie savanna and then again in two different commemorations of Earth Day. It elicited a lot of curiosity and proved a useful landmark for toy-trading, art workshops, and discussion. And the whole thing ran on a solar panel with a portable battery!

RB: Do you think it would be possible to prevent the degradation and disposal of the discarded items you use to create arts in the first place?

KC: My conclusion from *Harvest* was that it really comes down to governments and corporations to make changes at the scale required to solve our environmental problems. That said, *individuals* move legislation and organizations through public pressure. To that end, my monument links to a webpage that shows visitors options to act.

In the meantime, there are plenty of artists and businesses promoting reuse of materials that would otherwise require hundreds of years to break down in a landfill. Pressure exerted by all of us results in legislation, international treaties, and at the business level, new approaches such as Benefit Corporations (B Corps) or resale/rental platforms for clothing and other goods, etc. To be sure, we're still at the mercy of immensely powerful interests and presently here in the US, an exceedingly destructive and corrupt government. If, however, you believe Bill McKibben's research,¹ the massive conversion to solar and wind power remains unstoppable because huge numbers of people across the globe demand it and businesses are profiting from its delivery. Data centers (the next energy gobbler no one asked for) are increasingly being fought and forced to conform to budding legislation. It's a constant battle, which is again why we need researchers, scientists, journalists, activists, and all creative thinkers on the case.

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RB: What kind of regeneration do you think we now need most for an ecological future?

KC: Well, at the risk of sounding US-centric, I'd say, first and foremost we need a political regeneration. Unfortunately, the US has an outsized influence on so many global issues, starting with our destructive support of wars and their tragic costs to human life, culture, and the environment. This particular "regeneration" is already underway, I think, as evidenced by Democrats having flipped 28 Republican-held seats since the current administration came to power, even in districts most heavily in favor of Trump.² It's imperative we oust these horrifying "leaders" and return to policies that promote peace, compassion, and "the general welfare," as described in our constitution. We must reinstate funding for international relief, science-based medical research, quality education, environmental policy, investment in the humanities, and so much more. If we want positive, widespread progress, we need to do it at scale, with the full force of the US government behind us. In the meantime, we still have our individual state policies and can make significant progress at that level.

RB: From what you said before, do you think there are explicit responsibilities on the individual–person and business–level?

KC: Plenty of individuals and businesses are attempting to make a difference, but we can only work with what's available to us. For example, it's clear now that plastic recycling—at least in the US—just isn't really happening. I, personally want to cut down on plastic but when I walk into a grocery store, I only have the packaging choices provided to me. We need legislation and corporate structures that compel governments and companies to set standards for large-scale solutions. Our responsibility as individuals is to tell them—relentlessly—what we want.

RB: . . . which we try to do with writing and art. You talked about your art as aiming to "describe our landscapes as they *truly* are," with its human interventions. Would you call your art "environmentally friendly," considering the landscape transformations it shows?

KC: I don't think much that we humans do is "environmentally friendly," especially at the scale of our population and consumption. What I'm trying to convey through my work is a sense of reality and curiosity—bringing back into view the things we don't see or that we ignore. And with this most recent work, *Regeneration*, to call attention to places that aren't well understood or might be considered "worthless." Wetlands and grasslands aren't as dramatic or breathtaking as mountain ranges, but they are beautiful in a subtle and complex way. They are some of the most diverse ecosystems on the planet and they support us in irreplaceable ways.



Kim Curtis, *Regeneration: Regal Fritillary*, 2025, mixed media on canvas, 70 x 70 cm (detail). © Kim Curtis. All rights reserved.

In the US, most of our tallgrass prairie was eliminated by the mid-1900's and now with hybrid seed technology, even the grasslands further west, which were always considered poor farmland, are being quickly destroyed for row-cropping. We need to stop converting these crucial ecosystems into industrial farms, and we can do that in part by amplifying successful, convincing strategies. I just finished reading an incredibly thorough, entertaining book called [*Sea of Grass* by Dave Hage and](#)

Josephine Marcotty. They've compiled decades of stories and data from the American Midwest into a fascinating narrative that describes "the conquest, ruin, and redemption of nature on the American prairie."

RB: And how about "sustainable"? Would that be a fitting description for your art?

KC: As far as "sustainability" in my studio goes, our old paint, rags, and toxins are recycled into fuel, and our fantastic landlord has converted the entire complex to solar and geothermal heat-pumped power with low-energy LED lighting. We're also surrounded by restored prairie: lots of birds, animals, and buzzing insects to help mitigate the presence of industrial farming throughout the region. Again, the larger system needs to promote these interventions to a wider population and thankfully, Illinois is currently considering legislation that addresses the confusion and complication involved with switching to more efficient—and economical—energy sources. The "Clean and Healthy Buildings Act" not only provides funding for modernizing energy in homes and rental housing but also establishes an online state-wide resource to help people understand their options. These are actionable policies that can make a huge difference in energy consumption. We Illinoisans need to ensure that bill gets signed into law.



Regeneration series in gallery. © Kim Curtis. All rights reserved.

RB: Last but not least, what future projects do you have in mind?

KC: I like to immerse myself in experiences and research, then watch what emerges when I get back to art-making. Right now, I'm looking into art residencies where I can prioritize learning and observation. I prefer to study areas that are mysterious to me: where I can discover what makes an ecosystem tick. I'm still very interested in "comeback" stories and inspired by people working to re-establish broken systems.

One thing I've loved about studying the prairie is the utter chaos: it's out of control. So much is going on simultaneously and it's constantly changing because our seasons are so drastic. I hope to

keep exploring these kinds of overwhelming and confusing places, while meeting the people working in them who have so much fascinating information to share. It's really what gets me excited.

And of course, there's my fantastic job at the University of Illinois Department of Theatre, where we're currently working on a play called "Radium Girls" about the young American girls poisoned by radium during the 1920's-40's as they worked their exciting and patriotic new jobs painting radium on watch dials. Then in May, our family will travel to Japan where I'll convince my son to leave the Ghibli park early to visit one of your zero-waste cities!

Notes

¹ Chris Hayes, host, *Why is This Happening? The Chris Hayes Podcast*, "Here Comes the Sun" with Bill McKibben," produced by Simplecast, 30 August 2025.

² Natalie Fertig, "Democrats Are Trouncing Republicans in State Elections Since Trump Took Office," *Politico*, 3 December 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/03/12/dems-flip-28-state-legislature-seats-in-trump-2-0-00827125>.



Kim Curtis holds degrees in history of art from the University of California at Berkeley and in painting/drawing from California College of the Arts in Oakland, CA. She is based in Illinois where she teaches costume design at the Department of Theatre, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.



Regina M. Bichler studied chemistry, biochemistry, and Japanese studies in Munich, Pavia, and Osaka. She has been researching the zero-waste town Kamikatsu in Japan and the discrepancy between Japanese discourse on nature and environmental practices. She is a PhD candidate at the RCC, working on zero-waste cities in Germany and Japan from a social-practice perspective, and will submit her thesis in 2026.



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