The scenic un•real

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THE SCENIC UN•REAL

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2019

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“Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.”

Walter Benjamin
“Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

“Kitsch is nothing if not a suspended memory whose elusiveness is made ever more keen by its extreme iconicity... a virtual image, existing in the impossibility of fully being.”

Celeste Olalquiaga
The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience
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Most importantly, to my parents, Dan and Laura Jean Becker: You believed I could spend my life making art, even when I didn’t believe it myself. My love for you and gratitude for your support is boundless.
My immersive print-based installations rearrange and re-contextualize human-made depictions of Nature. These works unmask the facsimile, the artificial, the dream-image of Nature that exists as Other, particularly within American culture. Nature as a concept is, according to the Oxford Dictionary, “opposed to humans or human creations,” and this definition of Nature-as-a-world-apart is implicit in much of the Western canon of art and media. The stories we tell about Nature augment our perception of the world around us. In the context of the Anthropocene, I feel an uneasiness regarding depictions of Nature within capitalist society due to the growing realization that our worldviews regarding the biosphere have not served us well.

In my work, botanical designs and landscape paintings are exaggerated to the point of parody, clamoring with a cacophony of Nature that verges on oversaturated kitsch. The inspiration for these works includes William Morris wallpaper, plastic houseplants, the Hudson River School, Astroturf, silk flowers, and snow globes. Dripping with saccharine superficiality, kitsch imagery echoes pre-existing tropes without apology. Any sincere depiction of our environment that attempts to break with the false duality of human-made/non-human would dissolve its own meaning in attempting to describe all of reality, from snails to sidewalks to HDTVs. Thus, the only way I am confident in my ability to discuss Nature without hypocrisy is through romantic irony: an awareness that my depictions of Nature are unconvincing.
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My work explores the fetishization of landscape as “other” in industrialized cultures, particularly in the United States. This investigation takes place within the context of the Anthropocene, a term introduced by biologist Eugene Stoermer in the early 1980s and popularized in 2000 by Nobel-prize winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen. Before I can begin to introduce my work, I feel it is important to discuss this term in a general sense, and in doing so to orient readers towards my underlying concern regarding our current moment.

The term Anthropocene refers to changes in the geologic record due to human activities such as colonization, agriculture, industrialization, and urbanization. These activities have had a profound effect on the biosphere and atmosphere, resulting in global warming, ocean acidification, ocean ‘dead zones,’ habitat loss, and species extinctions. The beginning of the Anthropocene is generally defined as occurring alongside the Industrial Revolution in Europe, but other markers have been proposed, for example, at an earlier date coinciding with the onset of agriculture or at a later date coinciding with the start of the nuclear age.¹ Many theorists have taken issue with the title “Anthropocene” because of its implication that all humans and all cultures are equally the cause of these global changes, because of the narcissism of naming an entire epoch after ourselves, and also because of the implication that it is inevitably human nature to alter the Earth in destructive ways.² Other proposed terms include Jason Moore’s Capitalocene, which puts more specific focus on our economic paradigm as a root of these changes, and Donna Haraway’s Chthulucene, which advocates for a re-structuring of anthropocentric narratives that is, “made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen—yet. We are at stake to each other.”³ In this essay, I have chosen to use the term Anthropocene because it is currently the most widely accepted and thus most relatable terminology. However, I do so with the

² Haraway, Staying with the Trouble, 44-51.
³ Ibid, 55.
acknowledgement that it is a flawed term that oversimplifies the nuances of the situation it describes.

Whatever language we use to discuss it, climate change is an object so vast that is difficult for humans to comprehend. We experience its effects as isolated events like hurricanes, wildfires, or melting glaciers, but cannot know them fully all at once because they span such a vast expanse of space and time. Although my research tells me these events are symptoms of a larger phenomenon, it is difficult to truly feel the reality of the change. The predicted long-term effects on our planet are happening on a timescale that is different from our everyday experience of the world. The realization that our landscapes will change and that both human and non-human populations will be negatively affected can cause feelings of guilt, anger, and anxiety. Furthermore, climate change makes it clear that many of the Western metanarratives that legitimized economic and political structures were not in fact beneficial to the human species they sought to prioritize, since they have effectively encouraged the destruction of our habitat. It is easier to create emotional distance between oneself and the reality of Anthropocene disasters than it is to acknowledge and accept the need for a paradigm shift. Thus, our planet is changing but the Western concept of “Nature” has largely remained the same. If we are to stay present and adapt to the realities of climate change, it is necessary to sit with uncomfortable feelings. In my role as artist, I use printmaking and sculpture to memorialize artificial visionings of Nature and to help myself come to terms with a need for a paradigm shift. These experiments have lead to ontological questions about how the narrative of Nature affects our assumptions regarding the real and the artificial.
NATURE AS A WORLD APART

The Oxford Dictionary defines Nature as “the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations: ‘the breathtaking beauty of nature’”. I explore my relationship with Nature by rearranging and re-contextualizing manmade versions of something that is supposedly by definition “opposed to humans or human creations.” Under a critical eye, the definition breaks down quickly and the construct of nature is a container that does not hold water. Nature-lovers, I present to you five things: A field of flowers, a photograph of a field of flowers, a floral pattern on a dress, dandelions peeking up between the cracks of my concrete driveway, a scented soap that includes lavender as an ingredient. Which of these is nature? Which of these is the most authentically natural? Which thing makes you feel most connected to nature when you interact with it? My initial instinct is to choose the field of flowers, which is also the thing I interact with least frequently. As the thing that is most separate from my everyday life, it retains a certain purity. However, we preserve that purity at the risk of establishing distance between the landscape and ourselves. If the field of flowers (far away) is the real nature and the driveway dandelions (right here) are just weeds in an urban landscape, then perhaps my actions as an urban dweller, complicit in climate change, can also feel separate from my identity as a nature-lover. However tempting it is to see the field of flowers as the one true Nature, my experience of that field both informs and is informed by ever-present digital photographs, decorative interpretations, and commercial uses of those flowers. Ecological theorist and philosopher Timothy Morton writes, “Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman.” That is to say, the object of admiration becomes fetishized and one-dimensional in the eyes of the viewer. Back to the question: which thing is the most authentically natural? All of them, equally, but in nuanced ways. In the end, it is tricky to tell whether contemporary assumptions about the natural world are

are based on images or experiences. In the end, everything is made of matter, from a snail to an HDTV, and we are all, on some level, of the same stuff. The urban world is not truly separate, and nature cannot be saved from manmade ecological disasters by being safely locked away in national forests. If we are ever to design urban systems that integrate more successfully with ecological processes, we must come to understand how our ideas about nature inform our experiences in nature. Alongside our study of ecology itself, we must also study nature in its most artificial manifestations.

The concept of Nature as Other creates a false dichotomy by locating humanity as separate from every other element of the planet Earth and lumping all other existing phenomena into an opposing category. In the context of Enlightenment thought, which places value on “progress”, Nature refers to the Unknown; that which will be conquered by science. In the context of Victorian Romanticism, which birthed modern-day mainstream Environmentalism, Nature refers to a pristine wilderness that must be “restored to its rightful position over a defiantly prodigal humanity.”6 Both worldviews create a divisive boundary between the human and the non-human.

Figure 1: Parlour Bramble (Pigeon Year), 2018, Linocut, 11’ x 30’.

The story of the Passenger Pigeon, which inspired the wallpaper installation Parlour Bramble (Pigeon Year), provides a haunting example of how commodifying ecological phenomena proves counterproductive. Although Passenger Pigeons were once

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the most populous bird species in America, white colonists enjoyed them so much we destroyed them. They were hunted to extinction throughout the 1800s: shot for sport by wealthy gentlemen, baked into pot pies in the Midwest and incorporated into elaborate entrees in fancy New York restaurants. These birds had been hunted and enjoyed by indigenous Seneca communities for generations, but the Seneca were always careful not to overhunt. White colonists, under a capitalist system that valued the birds as a financial commodity, did not show such restraint. In the words of game dealer Edward Martin: “they went as a cannon ball into the ocean: now in plain sight, then a splash, a circle of ripples—and nothing. It was as if the earth had swallowed them.”7

Figure 2: Parlour Bramble (Pigeon Year), 2018, Linocut, detail of 11’ x 30’ installation.

The other inspiration for this piece was William Morris’ fabric and wallpaper designs. William Morris was a poet and designer within the Romantic Movement, and his décor brought the beauty of the outdoor environment into the homes of the wealthy. The idea behind this piece was to create an interior decor that explodes messily off the wall and into real space, blurring the boundary between tame and wild and between image and

7 Quoted in Price, Flight Maps, 4.
object. Pattern via tiled imagery made it possible to create a print large enough to blanket a vast expanse of space. Prints were tiled across the gallery wall, then selectively hand-cut into viney brambles and layered dimensionally to mimic a tangled thicket of plant-life. The edges of the piece were feathered to aid the transition from white gallery wall to bramble. This transition gives the impression of a simulation peeled up around the edges; or perhaps that the gallery was the simulation and a rift opened up to expose the bramble.

HANGING OUT IN THE DISTANCE BETWEEN SELF AND OTHER

Fetishization of Nature relies on a constructed boundary that locates the environment as Other than and separate from human affairs. Scholars Adrian Ivakhiv and Timothy Morton, amongst others, have proposed that one influential root of this boundary lies with mind-body dualism as posited by Descartes in the 17th Century. Descartes argued that mind (res cogitans, or ‘thinking thing’) exists separately from body (res extensa, or ‘material thing’). His philosophy holds that only humans possess res cogitans and thus all other animate and inanimate things in the world are res extensa, that is, material things that are perceived by the human mind. This establishes the human mind as “subject” (perceiving thing) and the rest of the world as “object” (perceived thing), making humankind the main character of all of existence and setting it apart as a privileged category.

In the 21st Century this theory is no longer taken as a given in academic discourse and scientific research, but it still pervades the Western cultural sphere. Mind/body or subject/object dualism sets up a justification for hierarchy of res cogitans over anything designated as res extensa (which is seen as the other/the non-human). This philosophy suffuses many insidious “isms,” including modernism, nationalism, capitalism, imperialism, racism, and classism. Cartesian dualism has formed a basis for subjugation when the category of res cogitans is narrowed to exclude human or nonhuman animals who differ in culture and appearance from the perceiving “subject”.

Ivakhiv writes that the moral distinctions made possible by this dualism, “may be necessary to certain forms of human society. In an industrial capitalist society, however,
they have become interwoven within a nexus of practices which have had the cumulative effect of enframing and subjecting nonhuman animals within systems of domination and exploitation that are certainly comparable to intra-human forms of oppression.”8 I would argue that this cumulative effect goes beyond the exploitation of nonhuman and human animals to encompass the exploitation of flora and nonliving objects as well. It allows for blindness to the global effects of capitalism and imperialism that are currently resulting in human-induced climate change and a Sixth Extinction.

Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and Graham Harman’s Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) provide alternatives. In subject/object dualism, the interaction is a one-way exchange: the subject perceives and acts upon the object, and the object remains inert, lacking agency. ANT and OOO, however, treat all objects as actors and participants. In ANT, the networks that form between objects define reality, and in OOO, there is nothing but objects, regardless of whether or not the object participates in a network. In both philosophies, objects have agency. When I drink water from a glass, all objects involved (glass, water, me) affect each other. My arm moves the glass through space, the glass uplifts the water, the glass begets the feeling of cool, smooth, solid material against my skin, the water hydrates my body, and my body processes the water. This experience could not exist in the same way without the participation of all objects involved. Morton, a proponent of OOO, writes, “At this ontological level there is not much difference between what I, a human with a mind (supposedly) do, and what a pencil does to a table when it rests on that table. Holding, sitting and thinking belong to the aesthetic dimension, that is, the causal realm. There is another realm: the realm of being. Objects of all kinds (me, the cup, the table) occupy both realms.”9

This premise sets the stage for the practice of being-with that is necessary in the now and in the future if the kinds of objects, human and nonhuman, that currently populate time and space are to maintain agency despite the conditions of the Anthropocene. Donna Haraway’s practice of “staying with the trouble” and “making kin” and Timothy Morton’s “Dark Ecology” offer alternatives to both Enlightenment and Romantic notions of Nature as a world apart. These practices of being-with require an

9 Morton, Realist Magic, 67.
acceptance of *interobjectivity*, or the idea that “every event in reality is a kind of inscription in which one object leaves its footprint in another one. Interobjective reality is just the sum total of all these footprints, crisscrossing everywhere.”\(^{10}\) In such a world, a human exists as one object and recognizes the existence of other objects, but embraces that otherness and values other objects as co-conspirators. Being-with means accepting and valuing the other as actor and contributor to the fabric of reality. Being-with means acknowledging and embracing the other rather than rejecting it on the basis of its unknown aspects. Returning to an earlier example, this framework requires that we see the flowers in the field, the dandelion in the driveway, and the floral dress as equally valid actors rather than as elements of separate stage-sets where human actors play out the roles and assumptions that feel most comfortable in the context of each object. The floral dress is just as much a part of the biosphere as the flower in the field or the human walking through the field while wearing the dress.

Donna Haraway writes, “staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”\(^{11}\) With this statement, Haraway acknowledges the complexity of multispecies interactions within our current epoch. Her call to action requires us to disentangle ourselves from fictions and value judgments about our past and future relationships to landscape. This disentangling is a fraught process that requires, first and foremost, a meditation on our own assumptions about landscape. My artwork engages with this process of disentanglement by making visible the artifice inherent in edenic visions of ecological phenomena, for better or for worse.

There is much within the dualistic visioning of Nature that is comfortable, beautiful, and seductive. Romanticism created a Nature that is both aspirational and nostalgic. Nature becomes an idyllic escape from the banalities of urbanization, an escape infused with purity and majesty. As unhelpful as this vision of Nature-as-a-place-apart is in the context of climate change, it holds cultural weight as a fantasy that provides solace through simplification. In his philosophy of Dark Ecology, Morton proposes that an

\(^{10}\) Ibid, p 73.

\(^{11}\) Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 1.
acknowledgement and re-visioning of dualism may in fact be the answer to the nature-culture rift. He writes, “We must deal with the idea of distance itself. If we try to get rid of distance too fast, in our rush to join the nonhuman, we will end up caught in our own prejudice, our concept of distance, our concept of ‘them.’ Hanging out in the distance may be the surest way of relating to the nonhuman.” 12 As an artist, I approach this distance we have created in an attempt to understand it and make peace with it so that I can move on. For me, an irreverent investigation of Romantic-era Nature is part of the mourning process necessitated by the Anthropocene. Wallowing in artificiality is my way of making peace with a dead paradigm. My artworks are distillations of fantasy that encourage an awareness of the artifice inherent in Cartesian visionings of nature.

THE USEFULNESS OF KITSCH

My artwork does not depict the environments, ecosystems, and locales of planet Earth. My artwork depicts the facsimile, the artificial, and the dream-image of the Nature that exists as Other. Through OOO reasoning, this essay has posited that Nature is a construction rather than a true category of being, and with that in mind, the thought that I could create an artwork that summarizes or replicates environments, ecosystems, and locales feels presumptuous. Any attempt to change the paradigm by introducing a new concept of Nature risks creating new false categories. Thus, my study of Nature necessitates a study of the Artificial. Representations of Nature portray fears and hopes regarding this planet and this reality. Constructed Nature and its manifestations provide windows into a society’s desires, motivations, and yearnings. In industrialized societies, it sometimes depicts a yearning for authenticity, and sometimes depicts a yearning for control. It is simultaneously majestic in its ability to seduce our senses and nauseating in its undeniable falseness and its empty promises. The stories we tell about Nature color our perception of the world around us. On the brink of the Sixth Extinction, there is a

darkness to these depictions of Nature with the growing realization that our worldviews regarding other beings have not served us well.

Figure 3: *Garland*, 2018, Silkscreen, Lithography, Porcelain, Entomology Pins. Detail of 12’ x 6’ installation.

An example from my installation practice that engages with critical kitsch is the piece *Garland*. The inspiration for this piece was floral garlands, particularly the silk flower garlands sold at craft stores, and porcelain animal figurines. I had an elderly neighbor growing up whose entire house was filled with porcelain figurines, and when my mother and I visited her home I spent my time there enchanted by these candy-colored idyllic miniatures. The figurines in *Garland* are created from plaster molds used in industrial slip-casting. The flowers were printed in sheets and cut out using a laser cutter or plotter cutter. The neon glow is created by printing flats of silkscreen ink on the backs of the paper, and the color reflects off of the wall to create the illusion of light. Prints are affixed with entomology pins, which allows for the illusion of depth and also references natural history specimen displays, another instance of controlled and meticulously organized nature. The ceramic figurines sit atop foam shelves adorned with pinned prints.

This work politicizes kitsch as a tool for exploring false definitions without accidentally creating new falsehoods. By approaching my subject with irony, I expose its
artificiality. Morton proposes that if attempting to create a “new and improved” and contemporary aesthetic regarding Nature, an artwork risks adding to the “consumerist appreciation for the reified world of nature. In so doing, it would ironically become another form of kitsch. Instead of trying to escape kitsch only to be sucked back into its gravitational field, we should try another approach. This would be the paradoxical one of thoroughly delving into, even identifying with, kitsch… Is it not possible for sentimentalism and critique to exist together?”13 My installations capture the saccharine superficiality of porcelain animal figurines, gaudy floral wallpaper, and snow globe souvenirs. Kitsch manifestations of Nature do not attempt to add new layers of meaning to our experience of reality; they are unselfconsciously echoes of pre-existing dogma. I choose kitsch as my subject because it is not my intention to author new metaphors regarding the natural world, only to expose and process what is already embedded in American culture.

Figure 4: Garland, 2018, Silkscreen, Lithography, Porcelain, Entomology Pins. 12’ x 6’

Kitsch is a distillation of social reality. A kitsch object appeals to its audience through a reliance on pre-existing assumptions and implicit desires rather than attempting to create new meanings, analysis, or cultural critique. Celeste Olalquiaga writes, “Kitsch

13 Ibid, 155.
is nothing if not a suspended memory whose elusiveness is made ever more keen by its extreme iconicity. Despite appearances, kitsch is not an active commodity naively infused with the desire of a wish image, but rather a failed commodity that continually speaks of all it has ceased to be—a virtual image, existing in the impossibility of fully being.”\textsuperscript{14} What better mode than kitsch, in the age of the Anthropocene, to speak of the failed Cartesian model of Nature? The mourning process necessary to banish old ideologies and make room for new paradigms must be indulgent of nostalgia.

By making an idea seem quaint, kitsch strips it of its power while allowing it to retain its sentimentality. By “speaking of all it has ceased to be,” a kitsch object releases its viewer from the spell of the wish image. Once an idea becomes encased in the realm of kitsch it is no longer convincing. We are left with a yearning for the remembered or imaginary desire but with an understanding that there is no true resolution. Kitsch is the death rattle of outworn paradigms. Kitsch memorials to ecocentric bliss allow me to preserve my sentimentality towards the false concept of Nature without becoming entrapped in its false promises.

\textbf{SIMULACRA}

Unconvincing artifice is a ticket to the realm of make-believe, where we must use our imaginations to fill in the gaps and relate the facsimile back to reality. Unconvincing artifice encourages thoughtfulness, play, and critique. However, when artificiality becomes too convincing, it encourages complacency. My goal in these artworks is to unmask convincing unrealities. The Romantic Era ideal of “Nature as a place apart,” which is my focus, continues to thrive in post-digital capitalism. As consumers become further removed from the means of production, our firsthand experience of raw materials diminishes. Our participation in ecosystems is filtered through industrial processes and mediated by product advertisements in print and on the Internet. As an urban dweller and a consumer of digital media, images of wilderness are more readily available to me than a

\textsuperscript{14} Olalquiaga, \textit{The Artificial Kingdom}, 28.
real-time in-person wilderness experience. Cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard writes,
“When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity.”\textsuperscript{15} When the images become more pervasive than experiential interactions with landscapes, the landscape begins to be defined by the image rather than the other way around.

In his essay “Simulacra and Simulations,” Baudrillard outlines this phenomenon. He posits that postmodern culture is so reliant on facsimiles to produce meaning that the facsimiles are no longer referential of any underlying reality, but rather that representation has come to precede and determine what is real. “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself.”\textsuperscript{16} The simulacrum he describes does not obscure some underlying truth. Rather, it fools the viewer into a belief that there is an underlying truth at all. Reality becomes hyperreality. I posit that representations of Nature act as simulacra that refer to a nonexistent phenomenon, and in doing so they bring Nature into being.

My own experience of hiking in Vedauwoo National Park, Wyoming serves as an example. I had never visited Wyoming before, but I have seen the “Old West” landscape many times in Western movies, on model train sets, in amusement parks, in cartoons. In person, at the real place, the landscape felt unsettling and strange. I had the eerie sensation that these perfectly sculpted rocks and bright yellow aspens with smooth white trunks could not be real. I felt like I was standing in a movie set or a museum diorama, albeit an extremely expansive and all-consuming one. Signifier and signified were switched, and the real place felt like a facsimile of the diorama, rather than the other way around. The simulacra that preceded my first-hand experience defined my interpretation of the landscape.

This anecdote about Vedauwoo epitomizes the manner in which media informs our visioning of reality. My goal is to cultivate an awareness of this phenomenon. One art project that relies on simulacra to generate Nature is my \textit{View-Master} series. These

\textsuperscript{15} Baudrillard, \textit{Selected Writings}, 166.  
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 167.
sculptures are glossy white porcelain replicas slip-cast from a mold of a plastic View-
Master toy from my childhood. Each sculpture holds a single cardstock slide, and on each 
slide is printed a different text description of landscape: Majestic Mountains, Babbling 
Brook, and Rolling Hills. This text is the only clue given to the viewer, and each viewer’s 
own experience of simulacra defines their response to the object. The image that is 
brought to mind by the text is not referential of a real place, but rather references the 
amalgamation of remembered experiences and images that influence the viewer’s 
perception of landscape.

Figure 5: View-Master Series, 2018, silkscreen and porcelain, each sculpture 4” x 6” x 4”.

The original View-Master toys were designed and marketed by a company called 
Sawyer, Inc. that got its start in the 1920s as the nation’s largest producer of scenic 
postcards. The View-Master was first introduced at the 1939 World’s Fair and its original 
subjects were Carlsbad Caverns and the Grand Canyon. It was the heir of the Victorian 
stereoscope and the predecessor of the 21st Century Oculus Rift. A View-Master attempts 
to duplicate the world in three dimensions by presenting each eye with a slightly different 
angle of the same scene. When held up to one’s face so that both images are viewed 
simultaneously, it replicates the optics of viewing a scene in person. The View-Master 
carries with it the stereoscope’s promise of virtual reality. These devices were marketed 
with the intention of giving viewers an authentic experience of nature and travel from the
comfort of the living room. The guide that accompanied a set of 1909 stereoscope slides of Yellowstone National Park went so far as to claim that, “The stereograph, with its provision for both eyes, sets before you exactly what you would see if you stood in the camera’s place and...makes you see the place exactly as you would if you were bodily on the spot.”\(^{17}\) The guide also reminds users that traveling to the real Yellowstone Park by railroad-train and stagecoach is time consuming, but that, “when you see the Yellowstone through the stereoscope you omit the hours of railway and stage ride, but, even without their service, you can secure for yourself a thoroughly accurate and usually vivid sense of location.”\(^{18}\) Furthermore, just in case the reader protests that the stereoscope cannot duplicate reality without the other senses of sound, smell, and touch, the guide reassures us that “After all, it is always sight which gives us by far the larger part of our knowledge of the world around us.”\(^{19}\)

These devices fascinate me because they provide insight into the connections between the procession of simulacra and the objectification of place. In order for consumers to believe an experience can be replicated through media, they must acquiesce to a distilled and simplified version of that experience. If we are to experience Nature through the View-Master, we must implicitly agree that Nature is a commodity that can be summarized by an image. In order for Nature to be commodified, it must be a thing that we want but cannot fully access in its original form. In his essay “the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin writes, “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.”\(^{20}\) Benjamin argues that a firsthand experience of an object, place, or moment is suffused with an aura that cannot be replicated and that does not translate into second-hand experience. We are haunted by a desire to possess this aura, and the consumption of media reproductions therefore becomes obsessive. In other words, Walter Benjamin would have been quite skeptical of the 1909 stereoscope guide that argued for a View-Master’s ability to recreate firsthand experience near-perfectly, although he would have been unsurprised by its attempts to do so.

\(^{17}\) Yellowstone Through the Stereoscope, 7.
\(^{18}\) Ibid, 11.
\(^{19}\) Ibid, 12.
NATURE AS NATIONALISM

In the United States, this desire to possess the aura of a landscape feels especially palpable. As a young country, the US sought an identity that was distinct from its European predecessors and that simultaneously asserted ownership over a newly colonized geography. Landscape has continued to play an important role American national identity over the course of this country’s history. Yellowstone became the first National Park in 1872, and the National Parks Service was established just a few decades later in 1916. These wilderness preserves were, and still are, frequently referred to as “priceless heirlooms,” “national heritage,” and “treasure of America.”

I am fascinated by the irony of a patriotism that relies on natural imagery as an expression of national identity while adopting economic and military policies that exploit landscape/resources. In 19th century America, landscape painting often functioned as propaganda for manifest destiny, and the American Landscape became a central character in justifying America’s right to nationhood. Bernd Herzogenrath proposes that during this period of American history, “in the natural world, people could reclaim the lost innocence of their individual and national origins. The Garden of America exemplified the Romantic perspective of nature, and thus posed a valid claim to an innocence already lost in Europe. Wild nature thus now became a source of national pride as the root of character traits for a unique national identity.” Celebration of wilderness fulfilled the need for historical monuments and national treasures in a nation too young to have formidable and historic human-made cultural symbols like the cathedrals and castles of Europe.

The Hudson River School and Rocky Mountain School painters, heirs to European Romantic painting, traveled the continent in search of sublime vistas during the nineteenth-century. Thomas Cole, one of the most well-known of the Hudson River School painters, is often interpreted as a creator of nationalist imagery, despite the concern about national industry demonstrated by his Course of Empire painting series,

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21 Coiner, Quotes, 56, 39, 11.

which turned a critical eye on a civilization that valued urban growth at the expense of the landscape. Despite the gravitas of this series, his most famous work remains View from Mount Holyoke, which can easily be read as a straightforward and idyllic pastoral scene. Tellingly, this painting was used as the showcard image for a 1987 exhibition entitled American Landscape that was sponsored by the Chrysler automobile corporation. Art historian Angela Miller writes, “the linkage of one of the masterworks of American painting with the Chrysler imprimatur simultaneously validated both the painting and the contemporary corporation by linking the fields of business and industry with the inexhaustible wilderness of the nineteenth-century imagination.”

Landscape paintings such as View from Mount Holyoke work well as advertising and propaganda images both in past and present, as they have been so successfully infused with lofty and vague concepts like “truth, beauty, and independence.”

Figure 6: This Land, 2017, stop-motion animation based on letterpress-printed flipbook, video projected at 25” x 36”.

With this history in mind, my animation “This Land” explores the role of nationalist landscape in the context of ecological destruction. The imagery is sourced from the aforementioned Thomas Cole painting View from Mount Holyoke (1835), and is accompanied by text from Katharine Lee Bates’ 1895 poem America (later set to music in 1910 as America the Beautiful). Throughout the animation, the image slowly

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23 Miller, Everywhere and Nowhere, 212.
disintegrates and the text disappears one letter at a time. In the end, all that remains is the text “AMERICA! AMERICA!” which flickers, suspended, in a vast and vacuous expanse of flat white nothing. This video, created in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, is an expression of concern for the future and of grief and guilt regarding my own contributions to Anthropocene disasters as a complicit citizen. The United States is, relatively speaking, a newcomer to this land, and it is important to acknowledge that in the past 400 years capitalism has augmented this landscape drastically and often violently. Our relationship to this land is, and likely will always be, rife with contradictions.

HYPERREALITY AND LANDSCAPE

Of particular interest to me is the manner in which past media renditions of landscape begin to affect and influence our perception of the natural world going forward. With each successive interpretation, the image becomes more and more distanced from the real, until it is impossible to imagine the experience of a landscape free of preconceived notions. The societal construct of Nature now suffuses our reality. This begets what Baudrillard calls, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."²⁵

My Wilderness Preservation Globes series explores the hyperrealities of landscape in America’s past, present, and future. These works are influenced by a hypothetical science-fiction trajectory that begins with Romantic nationalism, weaves its way through the creation of the National Parks Service, and culminates with manifestations of landscape that I conceive of as virtual nature preserves. It is a continued exploration of landscape’s significance in national identity that draws equal inspiration from the aesthetics of nineteenth-century and twenty-first century time capsules. These references are important in that I relate contemporary nostalgia for a mythical pristine

²⁵ Baudrillard, Selected Writings, 166.
Nature to the Romanticism that suffused Victorian culture in the wake of the Industrial Revolution.

Each of the *Wilderness Preservation* pieces is composed of a snowglobe-shaped sculpture resting atop a pedestal. These majestic vistas are encased in glass domes, rendered in cheap craft materials, awash with colored lights, and accompanied by blocky pixilation. The sculptures combine nationalist landscape painting, kitsch souvenirs, Victorian era keepsakes, digital images, and holograms.

Figure 7: *Wilderness Preservation Globes*, 2019, porcelain, globe, papier-mâché, acrylic paint, injet print, wood. Installation view.

Each globe contains a small papier-mâché diorama based on a different Hudson River School or Rocky Mountain School painting. The four paintings sourced for this project were Albert Bierstadt’s *Mount Corcoran* (1877), Thomas Moran’s *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (1872), Thomas Cole’s *View from Mount Holyoke* (1836), and David Johnson’s *Virginia Natural Bridge* (1860).26 The globes are illuminated from the bottom by the neon glow of colored LED lights beneath a translucent acrylic base. The sides of

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26 This vista was also commemorated in a painting by Frederic Edwin Church in 1852.
each landscape are painted with fluorescent colors to match the LEDs, as if to create the illusion that the landscapes are holograms emanating from pillars of light. The surface of each pedestal features a digitized, pixilated, and inkjet printed version of the painting encased in its corresponding globe.

Figure 8: Virginia Natural Bridge, After David Johnson, and Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, After Thomas Moran, 2019, porcelain, globe, papier-mâché, acrylic paint, inkjet print, wood. Each sculpture 50” x 10” x 10”.

In both the inkjet prints and dioramas, the image approaches simulacra by referencing the *painting* of the landscape, and its subsequent connotations, rather than referencing the landscape itself. The dioramas do so through miniaturization and by translating a flat image into a three-dimensional realm. Through scale, the landscape becomes less attainable. The inkjet prints distance viewer from authentic landscape by degrading the image to emphasize its flatness and obfuscate its representational subject matter. When viewed from a distance, the prints appear as direct copies of the painting,
but when viewed up close the image is unrecognizable. Through abstraction, the landscape becomes less attainable.

The *Wilderness Preservation Globes* also allude to commercial paintings by the likes of Bob Ross and Thomas Kinkade, which in themselves are derivative of the Hudson River School. Americans are notoriously fond of landscape painting, and landscape is certainly at the heart of much American kitsch. In 1994, two Russian artists, Komar and Melamid, set out to create an ideal American painting based on the preferences of American citizens. They interviewed 1000 Americans by phone to gather opinions about what makes art “good,” and the result was a landscape painting entitled *America’s Most Wanted*. They noted a preference for realism and for outdoors scenes, and remarked that the Americans who self-identified as having less art education were far more outspoken about their aesthetic preferences than those who claimed knowledge of art history. The painting created as a response to the interviews features a glittering lake, rolling blue hills, a vast sky of puffy white clouds, trees in autumn colors, and of course, George Washington standing confidently in the foreground. This is second-hand simulacra at its finest.

The American attitude regarding landscape both defines and is defined by the National Parks Service model of conservation. In the words of NPS Director Newton B. Drury, who lead the department from 1940-1951, our national parks, “make it possible for all Americans—millions of them at first-hand—to enjoy unspoiled the great scenic places of the Nation; to know what it was like before it was touched by civilization and before its resources began to be exploited commercially or modified by settlement and by agriculture and industry.”27 Like America’s National Parks, my *Wilderness Preservation Globes* are idyllic microcosms, secluded and protected from the dangers of the outside world. Protected land is of course a good thing from an environmentalist perspective, but also represents an oversimplification of an issue. If nature remains pristine and protected within its own isolated bubble, safe from the perils of urbanization, then what is to become of the land that remains outside of the bubble? If it is not categorized as pristine nature, will it still be treated sustainably? What of ecosystems in cities? We must be sure

27 Coiner, *Quotes*, 38.
that the existence of national parks does not lure us into a false sense of security regarding the future of our planet.

There is a book of short stories called *Love in the Anthropocene* by Bonnie Nadzam and Dale Jamieson that imagines a future where the only remaining ecosystems are meticulously managed by humans. A girl and her father go on a fishing trip in one of these future nature preserves, and he tells her stories of a time when nature was unpredictable and unstructured. In the world of the daughter’s generation, the only nature left is a glorified theme park, where every plant is beautiful and labeled with a placard, where there are no bears in the woods or sharp rocks at the bottom of the lake, and where no one ever gets lost, falls, or drowns. As they hike to their fishing spot, the father muses, “Actually be kind of exciting to find a weed…that’d be news.”

While reading this story, I wonder what my own future Nature will look like. A 2018 IPCC Special Report on climate change predicts that within my lifetime, if global warming continues at its present rate, the planet’s temperature will likely have risen to

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1.5°C above pre-industrial levels by 2050, or possibly sooner. This would result in hotter extreme temperatures in most inhabited regions of the planet, heavy precipitation in some regions, and drought in other regions. Small islands and costal areas will likely experience major flooding due to sea level rise. The geographic range of many animals will be limited by a changing climate. A rise of 1°C would cause approximately 4% of terrestrial land to undergo change from one ecosystem to another, and a rise of 2°C would cause approximately 13% of all ecosystems to undergo transformation. Melting permafrost, increased ocean acidity, and melting sea-ice will all affect Earth’s habitats. These ecological changes will greatly alter our reality. The report concludes that, “Climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth are projected to increase with global warming of 1.5°C and increase further with 2°C.” And this is just the next 30 years.

Imagine a dystopian post-anthropocene future in which the biosphere has been irrevocably altered by the mechanisms of capitalist industry. In this future, nostalgia for the planet’s past ecology has been placated by the creation of a hyperreal simulation that mimics the aspects of the former biosphere that were most valued by colonialist European humans in the 19th and 20th centuries. This new virtual reality Nature is a brighter, cleaner, crisper, and more saccharine version of the environments it references. The new virtual biosphere is saturated with hollow echoes of the old. How would such blurred boundaries between authentic and artificial effect the psychology of a society? How will they affect our understanding of what is real and what is virtual?

This thought experiment deals in extremes, of course, but I often encounter simulations in my contemporary moment that feel like subtle manifestations of a similar theme. When visiting Las Vegas for a conference last year, I was enchanted by the casinos’ indoor gardens, where plastic plants intermingled with real ones against a backdrop of slot machines. The gardens helped me forget how long it had been since I’d left the strip and gone outside. As another example, there is an app on my phone that plays nature sounds accompanied by landscape photographs. It promises to help me meditate, relax, or sleep.

The most constant simulacra in my day-to-day life finds its way into my pocket via social media. For example, the @natgeowild Instagram account transports me to a different ecosystem with every post that appears in my feed. Thanks to nature photography, I feel very familiar with, for example, the idea of a rhinoceros, despite never having shared a habitat with one. I have seen a rhinoceros in person at a zoo between one and three times, but I can’t remember exactly, since I’ve also seen so many pictures of them and the experiences begin to blur together. In 2018, the last male northern white rhino died. When the last two females die, the species will be extinct, but the image of the northern white rhino will still exist in photo and video form.

Extinct species and historical environments continue to occupy space in our collective imagination notwithstanding their lack of existence in contemporary reality, and their characteristics and implications continue to evolve and shift over time. Thanks to the Oculus Rift virtual reality headset, I once stood in an empty and cavernous expanse of space next to a Tyrannosaurus Rex, who circled around me and roared. To observers, however, I was a girl standing in a living room on a rag rug, surrounded by four humans and a cat, wearing a plastic mask on my face. That was the closest I’ve ever gotten to seeing a dinosaur. In 2050, will the Oculus Rift also be the closest equivalent to canoeing in the Everglades as they existed in 2019? The southern portion of Everglades National Park will vanish under water if we reach two feet of sea level rise, as is projected to occur as soon as 2068 under current conditions. Strangely, the concept of the Everglades, like the concept of the T-Rex, if documented and preserved through facsimiles, becomes immortal, regardless of its continued existence in physical form. I am equally interested in artificial manifestations of still-existent physical reality, as well as the nuanced shifts of meaning and aura that occur when objects are duplicated or simulated.

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DIGITAL BOTANY AND VIRTUAL REALITY

The installation *Wallpaper for Digital Botanists* simulates, in physical space, a virtual reality experience of decorative flora, and it aims to do so as overbearingly as possible as a means of creating an immersive parody of hyper-saccharine kitsch. Like *Parlour Bramble (Pigeon Year)*, this piece references the aesthetics of William Morris, but *Wallpaper for Digital Botanists* is a version of Art Nouveau that has been chewed up and spit out by consumer culture and digital reproduction. Each successive layer of augmentation and manipulation increases the artificiality of the final product. Like Morris’ designs, this project began with a drawing and then a block print of a stylized floral pattern. My roses and chrysanthemums, however, were drawn from jpeg photographs that I found through Google Image Search. My drawing was then digitally scanned and then mirrored in Photoshop to create a pattern. This new iteration was output by a laser printer and traced by hand onto a block of linoleum. After the image was hand-carved and printed on an intaglio press, it was once again digitally scanned, manipulated in Photoshop, and output by an inkjet printer. Each stage of translation adds distance between the image and its original.

Figure 10: *Wallpaper for Digital Botanists*, 2019, linocut and inkjet print, detail of 6’ x 8’ x 8’ installation.
The resulting pattern alternates between rows of aesthetically pleasing images that nearly mimic block-printed wallpaper and rows of warped/degraded images with off-register RGB layers that ultimately read as corrupted digital files. The wallpaper covers four walls and the floor of a 8’ x 8’ x 6’ room, which is lit by an LED spotlight cycling slowly and smoothly through various colors of light. The color shifts heighten the distortion of the image, and the combination of overwhelming garish pattern, the pulse of the light, and the lack of grounding focal points in the space result in a disorientation that borders on nausea. The glitch in both image and lighting functions as a disruptive reminder of the unreality of the space.

Figure 11: *Wallpaper for Digital Botanists*, 2019, linocut and inkjet print, wood, drywall. 8’ x 8’ x 6’

Unsettlingly, in the context of the Anthropocene, moments in which fetishization supersedes lived experience allow Nature-as-concept to remain virtually idyllic even as our biosphere changes irrevocably. My work investigates and responds to man-made nature as a way to further understand my ecological identity and my responsibility as a post-digital human. I see this investigation as a case study for the manner in which all media augments all reality, and I believe this ever-distant but ever-seductive relationship
with ecology highlights the increasing hyperreality of human experience in the twenty-first century. Assuming human societies survive climate change and are able to remain on the planet Earth, but in the event that climate change drastically augments the character of our environment, it is not altogether unrealistic to imagine our future experiences of nature-as-we-once-knew-it as increasingly virtual. I like to imagine my art installations as nostalgic future-memorials of the nature that once was. I predict that if capitalist society decimates our current habitats, the nostalgia for the pastoral and the sublime will only continue to grow stronger. The artificial nature will outlast the real, but will augment and become stranger and more self-referential over time. This is a difficult hypothesis to come to terms with, and by engaging with artificial nature I hope to gain perspective on this hyperreal contradiction.
REFERENCES


