

*Curious  
Nature* | 2018 ALUMNI TRIENNIAL  
AUGUST 3 - SEPTEMBER 15, 2018

*"The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness." -- John Muir*

*Curious Nature* brings together a diverse group of artists who draw inspiration from the natural world. Employing various mediums, from painting to sculpture, photography, and installation, their works are rooted in the act of looking closer.

"These artists explore our relationship with the natural world through investigating the structure of reality, daily rhythms, beauty, texture, and emergent patterns. Focusing their attention on places and processes that are often overlooked, they illuminate the various forces affecting ecosystems and the environment that surrounds us. Their perspectives range from the micro and macro, revealing new views of familiar terrain. In an attempt to capture that which is in a state of constant transformation, they record their surroundings, yielding works that inspire our own sense of awe, inviting us to both celebrate nature and protect it."

-- Guest Curator, Shannon Rankin '97

**"Inquisitive Views of a 'Curious Nature':  
Reflections on the Natural World and Our Place in It.**

by Prof. Dana Sawyer

The inspiration to curiosity is both obvious and inevitable, and for reasons the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty put into a nutshell when he wrote, "Because we are present to a world, we are condemned to meaning." The import of this statement is that soon after we are born we realize we live in a world beyond ourselves, a world populated by others, and so we come to wonder what our relationship with these others should be. What is the nature of the world around us? What is our place in that world? How should we treat the other species with whom we share it? Assessments and intimations regarding these questions come to us over the years from religion and philosophy, but they have also arisen from the minds and hearts of artists. The Romantic painters, from Caspar David Friedrich to Fredric Church, urged us to embrace nature as the manifest presence of God; the Realists of the 19th century envisioned nature, "red of tooth and claw," as a force to be reckoned with; and the Modernists used their work to depict and demonstrate the conquest of nature via human ingenuity. From these viewpoints and others, we have gleaned directives regarding how we should think of and act toward nature; however, such viewpoints, like all viewpoints, are filtered through the broad philosophical lens of our culture's values at a given time, and today, in the early 21st century, many of our earlier conceptions no longer apply. With this in mind, this show at the Institute of

Contemporary Art at MECA urges us to revisit the original and primal set of questions regarding the natural world, in the hope that the curious minds of the artists involved will trigger not only our own curiosity but reassessments of our world's own "Curious Nature."

What 'broad philosophical lens' shapes the 'nature' of the show on display?

There is certainly work here that reads immediately as 'post-modern' in that it uses unorthodox materials or challenges traditional conceptions of high and low art (for example, Isabelle O'Donnell's "sewn paintings" fulfill both of these characteristics); however, the show is most post-modern in its willingness to live with ambiguity, a plurality of viewpoints, and a lack of resolution (in this way arguably making it a mirror of nature itself). The goal here is exploration from multiple perspectives, using a broad array of media. There are a few generally settled opinions in the work, including the Romantic and the Modernist (for example, Danielle Gerber's copper sculptures and Bryan Stryeski's large paintings are rich celebrations of form and technique), but these sometimes dissonant perspectives are asked to live side-by-side in the same exhibition. What comes across most clearly is the curator's intent of allowing disparate and even enigmatic viewpoints to coexist. Shannon Rankin doesn't wish any particular perspective to capture the flag; she wishes to generate a sense of mystery by asking the viewer to feel comfortable with a kaleidoscope of assessments, none of which are pushed upon the viewer as settled opinions but rather as current appraisals in a series of on-going investigations. This gives the work, when viewed as a whole, an open-ended sensibility that is as much question as answer.

Are we 'a part' of nature or are we 'apart' from nature? Generally these artists seem more interested in investigating the possibilities than reaching a final judgment; however, they also collectively suggest that whether we live in harmony with the world or not, we should accept that *we are in concert with it simply because we live here*. Moreover, they set cynicism aside, offering an opportunity for reverence and celebration of the natural world - sometimes, as in the case of Kristin Fitzpatrick, even creating artwork out of biomimicry, suggesting that the artist is an extension of natural processes. Alan Watts once observed that, "We do not 'come into' the world, we come out of it as leaves from a tree," and Fitzpatrick clearly agrees. These artists - as a group at least - challenge our traditional assumption that we're somehow separate from the world by asking us to explore, as they have, how we might view all our actions as types of collaboration. What will happen to the natural world - and to us - in the future? This, they argue, will depend upon how we conceive and re-conceive of 'nature' today, and in this regard the show is timely and deeply relevant, not to mention lively and engaging.

"Curious Nature" is rich with a wide range of explorations, however, thematically speaking there are several clear tendencies, and primary among these are: (1) the liminality of human existence; (2) the mystery of nature itself; (3) our co-existence with the world as a form of collaboration; and finally, (4) nature's ability, for good or bad, to erode human enterprise or eliminate it altogether. Regarding the first theme, *Liminality*, Alisha Gould, to give one example, uses illusion and ambiguity of scale to remind us that we live in a space between the very big and the very small, as well as on the line that blurs growth and decay, and she asks us to consider how our senses both reveal and hide these liminal zones. Referencing the second theme, *Mystery*, Tessa Greene

O'Brien's mural work reminds us that the word bewildered derives from the same etymological root as does wilderness by using patterns and marks drawn from the "the wild coast" to create a space both "familiar and disorienting." Sam Richardson uses proximity sensors to create an interactive sound and image space that mimics nature's unpredictable responses to our presence and actions. In addition, Kayla Goulden's large format photographs seem at first blush to be straightforward images of maps or graphs, but closer inspection reveals they are derived from the grains and textures of rock surfaces, partially insinuating that these close-ups should be treated as "Rorschach Ink Blots" to be interpreted in personal terms and however the viewer sees fit. They become microcosmic examples of the incertitude with which the universe has asked us to coexist since first we began to wonder.

In terms of *Collaboration with Nature*, Annika Earley's wall pieces record her efforts to "root" herself in a specific ecosystem while negotiating terms with the other animals who live there. Meanwhile, Cat Quattrociocchi's series of "Specimens" are sculptures in vitreous enamel that replicate the beautiful "micro landscapes" she finds in plant mold. Working in a more historical vein, Celeste Roberge enlists her sculptures to remind us that we have not only harvested the sea over the past centuries but we originally derive from it, poignantly overlapping the recent past with 'long time.' Touching on the last major theme, the *Destructive Power of Nature*, Lenka Konopasek, in her work "Disputed Nature," employs a black wall sculpture to depict the natural world reclaiming the world of man (non-inclusive language intended), while Sarah Camille Wilson's ceramic pieces explore how we try to hold the world in place, seeking perfection and control, even as nature ceaselessly whittles away at whatever we do. Mark Marchesi makes a similar point in his photographs, recording the corrosive and deconstructive effects of nature on human structures but adding, insightfully, our side of the dance, depicting the human cultivation of natural landscape. Though nature's erosion and corrosion may be frustrating when viewed from a traditional perspective, Wilson, like Marchesi and Konopasek, finds an unexpected and uncertain beauty in what she terms this "transitive flux." Nature's raw power, interpreted as a force that can challenge and intimidate, is also alive and well in Charley Young's drawings of the Canadian Rockies; however, she attracts us to this raw power by abstracting the forms to reveal their visual allure. But these examples give only a glimpse of the work on view, and the true action lies in the mental and emotional spaces between the various pieces.

Anais Nin once wrote, "Life shrinks and expands in proportion to one's courage." This show, then, is expansive, because it asks us to wonder if we, as individuals and a society, dare to reimagine our place in the wild world.

Can coming inside entice us to rethink what lies outside? These artists invite our curiosity to find out, even as they remind us that 'nature' - however conceived - is vibrantly alive on both sides of the gallery door.