

Art review: Maine College of Art & Design faculty show ranges from serene to apocalyptic

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By Jorge S. Arango

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Benjamin Spalding, “SUPERNATURE,” mixed media installation, 2022, dimensions variable, and, in background, Jeane Cohen, “A Choir of Drowning Trees,” oil on canvas, 2020, 66 x 82 *Photo by Joel Tsui/Courtesy of ICA*

I’m not entirely sure whether this statement about “The Last Season on Earth: Maine College of Art & Design Faculty Triennial,” made by juror Sam Adams, is true or not: “The submissions ... register a low-key but constant sense of anxiety about the human impact on the natural world.”

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “The Last Season on Earth: Maine College of Art & Design Faculty Triennial”

WHERE: Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art & Design, 522 Congress St., Portland

WHEN: Through Feb. 19

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday (Thursday until 7 p.m.)

ADMISSION: Free, donations welcome

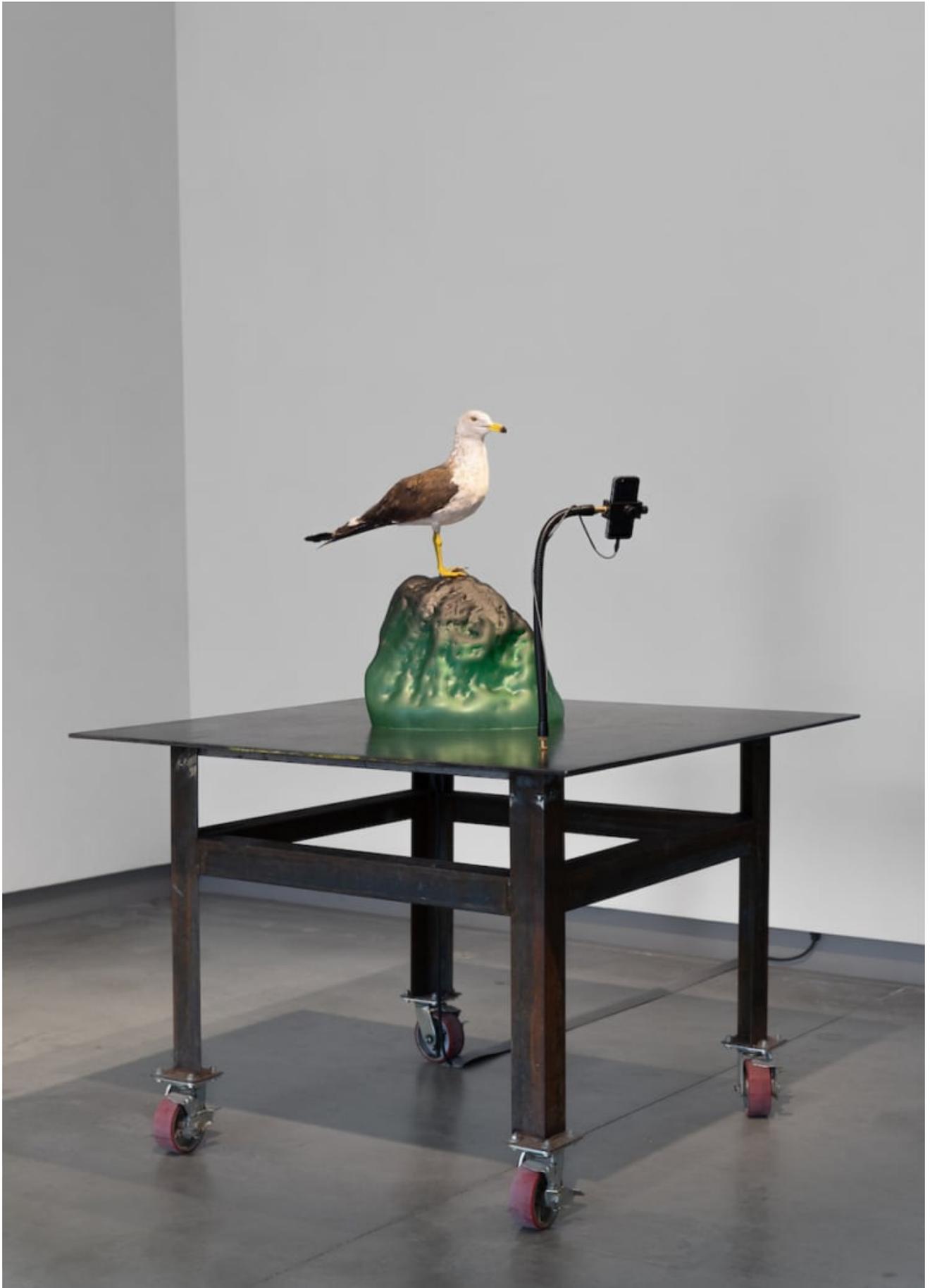
INFO: 207-899-5029, meca.edu/ica

The exhibition at MECA&D's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), which runs through Feb. 19, certainly features works that traffic in serious environmental concerns. But this is really only a loose rubric for an exhibition that dives into many other ideas worth contemplating.

I suppose the works most obviously aligned with what seems our imminent and inexorable ecological peril are the paintings of Jeane Cohen. Her canvases are in-your-face large, and her brushwork and Fauvist-on-steroids palette are wild and intense, evoking in the viewer equally intense emotions.

"Three Suns, Two Moons" approaches the apocalyptic. The painting is divided into five overlapping areas on a single canvas. In the three "sun" sections, the landscape is painted a toxic acid green, as though irradiated by the aftermath of a nuclear explosion. In the two "moon" sections, the planetary body in question is dimly glimpsed through what looks like the orange-tinted smoke of a wildfire. The trees in all the sections seem skeletal and singed.

The powerfully arresting 66-by-82-inch "A Choir of Drowning Trees" depicts the destructive wrath of nature during a wildfire. The red-orange flames shoot up the canvas with such explosive combustion that we can almost feel their deadly heat. By combining this with charred trees rendered in purple and thickly impastoed black, Cohen transmits a dramatic urgency that practically slaps us into attention. It is arguably the most commanding (and dire) work in the show. There is nothing "low-key" about it.



Joshua Reiman, “#glasseagull,” 1 mold blown glass rock, taxidermy seagull, flex arm, iPhone, video of @glasseagull instagram account feed, 2019, dimensions variable *Photo by Joel Tsui/Courtesy of ICA*

Nature persistently outwits humans in Joshua Reiman’s uneasily comic “#glasseagull,” where the taxidermy bird of the title perches atop a green cast glass rock. This is straightforward enough. But what animates the sculpture is the cellphone clipped to a stand in front of it. The screen scrolls through what looks like an Instagram feed of seagulls in various still shots and videos. Most notably for the theme of the show is a publicity shot of Alfred Hitchcock with a gull on his arm used to promote his horror thriller “The Birds,” where various avian species go on a vengeful, murderous spree in a Northern California town.

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There is a picture of a gull snatching a chocolate-coated doughnut out of a man’s mouth, as well as a video of a gull nonchalantly walking into a store and stealing a bag of junk food from the bottom rack of a snack display. We take for granted we’re the dominant species, but in Reiman’s sculpture, this creature’s crafty survival instincts constantly undermine this assumption.

But there are also artworks that carry no particularly anxious charge about the environment. Indeed, they can feel reverent and utterly sublime in their regard of nature. Taiwan-born Ling-Wen Tsai’s “Liminal” pieces are about the “essence of quiet and openness” that she encounters in nature, particularly in the Maine countryside after a snowfall. We see wisps of soft, blurry colors behind their translucent surfaces, but they are primarily white. Tsai’s works are so utterly still and silent that they feel serene and contemplative in the manner of Agnes Martin paintings.

Tracey Cockrell’s “portraits” of Maine landscapes present a hopeful and regenerative view of nature. She creates delicately thin sheets of papyrus using onions and kelp, in which she embeds conductive thread. Sounds of nature from the sites where she harvested these materials – birdsong, the buzzing of insects, the sound of a farm truck and so on – are faintly telegraphed through these organic “speakers” by activating a button underneath the papyri. They place us visually and audibly, as well as poetically, in the midst of the cycles of plant life on Earth, so that we can almost “hear” them growing.

Dominating the center of the largest gallery at ICA is “Supernature,” an astonishing sculpture by Benjamin Spalding. The artist statement reads: “His work weaves together a range of research and experience, including ecology, queer club culture and fantasy world-building.” Perhaps Spalding’s use of athletic apparel, which he stretches across metal armatures of these two body forms, does, as he says, “coalesce into alternate forms, mimicking pelts, sea urchins and herons, reminding us that we exist in a world beyond human aesthetics.”

While that's fair, to me this piece leans far more into the "fantasy world-building" part of Spalding's intentions. The figures can surely resemble praying mantises, and the figures' positions of dominance and submission might hint at some sort of sexual encounter. But with their bicycle helmets spiked with painted metal skewers, and their balletic grace (despite his materials' hard and sharp angularities), they appear more like intergalactic warriors engaged in a to-the-death battle. As the title indicates, they are more "supernatural" than "natural."



Tabitha Barnard, "After Service," archival inkjet print, 2021, 16 x 20 in. *Courtesy of the artist*

The supernatural is also the theme of Tabitha Barnard's photographs and Philip Brou's photorealist "Intellectual Zombie" paintings. Barnard and her sisters were enamored of horror movies and often restaged them for fun. These films frequently told cautionary tales about women (either as temptresses or femmes fatale, usually suffering consequences for some perceived immorality). In this way, they touch into a late 19th-century trend – practiced by the likes of Edvard Munch, Eugène Grasset and others – of depicting women as vampires. In both Barnard's images, she and her sister wear enigmatic, vacant expressions photographed in half-light that certainly feel unsettling.

Brou's paintings are extraordinary. He is the model, posing wearing a handmade zombie mask inside a plastic bag. From a distance, you would swear they are photographs. Yet to realize they are actually painted adds to the eeriness of disconnection from oneself that they mean to imply. The zombie mask is one level of dissociation, the plastic bag another layer of separation from one's soul, and the use of paint becomes another illusion that further obfuscates what is essentially true and alive about the subject. Again, we are delving into the supernatural here – an outer deadness that imprisons our true nature.



Philip Brou, "Philosophical Zombie," 2, oil on linen, 2022, 34 x 22 *Photo by Joel Tsui/Courtesy of ICA*

A possible way these might relate to the show's bleak scenario of the "human impact on our natural world" is, of course, that when we are not acting from our true nature, we tend to inflict harm on the planet and on others. The shell we create does not allow us to feel our own vulnerability, much less the vulnerability of the Earth to the various onslaughts of humans in their pursuit of money, convenience and other baser, more primitive instincts. I'm not sure that's what Adams, the exhibition juror, had in mind. But that does not take away from the incredible technique of Brou's painting.

There are other works where connection to the overarching theme seems tenuous. As much as I like Rachel Somerville's collages, they seem more about childhood and innocence than anything as foreboding as the desecration of the Earth (or anything edgy or negative at all, really). Elana Adler's lovely pieces do have to do with the wind as a destabilizing force to structures we might perceive as fixed, though it is a metaphor that extends to systems and structures way beyond just nature.

And Kyle Patnaude's self-flagellating work seems to be more about our inability to pin down anything definite regarding human sexuality (or its inherent contradictions and discriminations) than anything about nature. The wall label won't help you figure it out either; it takes the cake for one of the most opaque, convoluted pieces of art speak I've ever read. If it means to be shocking, I would say that Robert Mapplethorpe's images of men performing acts of bondage and discipline (and other less conventional practices) went a lot further.

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