

Imagining the Ecosphere:  
A Material Exploration into the Fantastical Possibilities of Life  
By Emma H. Baldwin

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*“When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless... Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon seemed to her limitless”*

Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

*“Drifting into my solitude, over my head  
Don't you wonder sometimes  
'Bout sound and vision?”*

David Bowie, “Sound and Vision”

## **Positionality: North Carolina Lakes and Suburbs**

There was a lake<sup>1</sup> at the bottom of the hill behind my house. It was surrounded by overgrown brush that shook when a breeze moved down the slope. I can remember sitting on the back of the couch, straining to see the other side. It felt like an enormous obstacle—one I knew I had to cross. I was convinced if I could get to the other side I'd be in a hinterland—the magic unknown. It was a place that spoke to me of possibilities and of an expansion beyond my suburban life in which the most exciting adventures consisted of being allowed to walk to the mailbox by myself.

When I finally got to the other side of the lake, it was exactly what I'd hoped. I found myself in awe of everything I could reach and everything I couldn't. But before I knew it, I was growing up. Real-life expanded and took my curiosity along with it. It was a long time before I remembered what was missing and to find again the ability to lose myself in the known and unknown.

In my art practice, I want to recreate something of the wonder I felt then, as a 10-year-old girl in the suburbs of eastern North Carolina<sup>2</sup>, wandering onto other people's property. In addition to that which I feel now as an adult who does her best to devote as much time as possible to being outside<sup>3</sup>. When I stand back from one of my finished paper installations<sup>4</sup>, I envision silence in the building. Except perhaps for that made by the tiny movements of the paper and the shuffling of my feet across the floor. I would like to stand in the middle of my space in the gallery and feel, alongside the tension, fear and the brutality of my expectations, the wetness seeping into my shoes from the boggy trail beneath my feet.

To my left, I'd like to sense the path dropping precipitously downward, and the presence of the adjacent hills and mountains looming against my side. Above me, when I observe the tiny strands of paper fibre that I've cut into trailing, wing-like ribbons, I want to feel the rough pine needles flipping across my skin as I sprint deeper into the woods, hoping my mom won't notice I'm missing.

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<sup>1</sup> I later found out it was a drainage pond but that didn't stop it from being the most beautiful drainage pond I'd ever seen.

<sup>2</sup> Holly Springs, North Carolina to be exact.

<sup>3</sup>Outside meaning, my tiny porch, the park a block from my house, or the provincial parks.

<sup>4</sup> Especially my idealized thesis work

Through these installations, it is my goal to transmute and extend the feelings of wonder and joy I experience in natural spaces and therefore prolong those states. By utilizing and expressing my affective<sup>5</sup> landscape through my artistic practice, I aim to provide myself with an extraordinary, and at the same time comforting, atmosphere in which to exist. I attempt to accomplish this feat through depictions of interconnected<sup>6</sup>, unrestrained, growing nature and a material exploration of the most surreal and fantastical biological possibilities I can envision. My installations are wondrous depictions of the ecosphere and my experiences with biophilia. The word “ecosphere” is used to refer to the Earth as one organism made up of an infinite number of smaller parts. “Biophilia” is defined as an affinity for the natural world and all living things (Dictionary.com).

Before proceeding, I believe it’s important to flesh out my definition of nature and the ways it differs from those readily available in books and on the internet. “Nature” is generally defined 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” (Oxford Dictionary). But I would like to define it as: the phenomena of the physical world collectively, excluding nothing except for that which humans have created using only artificial elements. My definition includes humans and non-human animals<sup>7</sup>, as well as flora, minerals and all other products of the earth. It is through this all-encompassing consideration of the natural world I understand my place in the ecosphere and my connection to all other human and non-human natures.

It is through drawing, watercolour painting, cutting, clay elements, and installing, that I bring into the world imagined florae and fauna. My process is time-consuming, but also thrilling, especially as it has evolved to function as its ecosystem (engaging with ideas of life, death, and rebirth). It requires my full attention and commitment to detail and expression.

Additionally, it is important to say that I do not understand my work as a means of escape from the climate crisis or my responsibilities as a human living on and consuming the planet. Rather, these spaces are ones in which I can assert a new way of observing the world, one in which I am

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<sup>5</sup>Any experience of feeling or emotion, ranging from suffering to elation, from the simplest to the most complex sensations of feeling (APA Dictionary of Psychology).

<sup>6</sup> “Having all constituent parts linked or connected” (Oxford Dictionary).

When I consider this word, I think about this formal definition, as well as one that unites all living things through their common “aliveness”.

A wonderful example comes from under our feet. In Braiding Sweetgrass Robin Wall Kimmerer discusses the layer of mycorrhizae, “The mycorrhizal symbiosis enables the fungi to forage for mineral nutrients in the soil and deliver them to the tree in exchange for carbohydrates”. She goes on to speak of a “bridge between individual trees, so that all the trees in the forest are connected”.

<sup>7</sup> The term “non-human animals” was popularized by Peter Singer in his life-changing book Animal Liberation (1975) while discussing and trying to combat speciesism.

not consumed by grief for what is lost, but hope for what can be reborn from the ashes. As will be discussed later in the paper, these spaces are inspired by fiction as much as they are theory. My installations are fictions, but ones that seek to cultivate wonder and joy as a way of encouraging greater interaction with natural spaces.

The lives I create stem from my research into natural spaces<sup>8</sup> as well as the desire to invent, aggrandize and transform those spaces and their inhabitants as a means of elaboration and expression of metamorphosis.

Writer and naturalist David Abram spells this out very eloquently in The Spell of the Sensuous with the following quote: “Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth-- our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese.”

He goes on to discuss the implications of closing one’s body and mind off from the wider natural world, stating: “To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our senses of their integrity and to rob our minds of coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality with what is not human.”

These two quotes speak to the connectivity I sense within a wide range of ecosystems as well as the power that recognizing and expanding that relationship can have. It is through embracing my connection to natural spaces, allowing my senses to flourish alongside the senses of other living and non-living inhabitants of the ecosphere, that I take pleasure in and feel myself a part of a larger whole.

## **Learning From the Past**

I started at Emily Carr University invested in understanding, depicting and changing human ideological beliefs about the natural world. This meant considering how different environments are valued and how on a scale of importance, various plant and animal species are ranked. I

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<sup>8</sup> Those I can physical reach, see “Coast Salish Territories, Walking and the Value of Biophilia” section, as well as those I can explore through books and databases.

believed that by rearranging or collapsing this hierarchy, conservation<sup>9</sup>, which is so dearly needed<sup>10</sup> in the contemporary world, would benefit.

At this point, Emma Marris, and her writings in Rambunctious Gardening: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World were deeply influential in reshaping how I understood learned natural value. For me, she redefined what nature is and what it can be. This was accomplished through her passionate essays equating the “pristine”<sup>11</sup> National Parks, to overgrown parking lots in her home town. Both she determined, are capable of inspiring wonder and providing opportunities for an investigation into their interconnected parts.

Without a doubt, her theories on natural value are at the root of how I consider the natural world. I work to always address my ideological preconceptions of what is beautiful, worth preserving or studying. Taking this way of thinking into my current body of work has allowed me to choose, without prejudice, how forms might come together.

While thinking about natural spaces, especially those in which we have learned to perceive as pristine it’s important to remember that the National Parks Marris speaks about and which I frequented are only acknowledged as “pristine” post-removal of Native peoples and the destruction, through burning and demolishing, of their homes. It is crucial that I, a beneficiary of the dispossession of Native lands, understand wilderness “as a historical and cultural construct.” I find it necessary to remember that I grew up with a specific ideological lens that depicted public or government “owned” lands as “uninhabited Edens rather than anthropological landscapes shaped by Indian fire setting, hunting, and plant breeding” (Spence).

As much as I cared, and still do care about theories of conservation, I realized early on in the MFA program that I had shuttled myself into and sealed myself within a nicely worded, but in the end confining, box. My art practice was an uninterrupted cycle of rules that continuously led back to the same question: How was I influencing the viewer for the better? I’ve wanted to move away from this question for a while, but I’ve found it difficult to put myself into the equation and consider why I care about the natural world, what it gives me and why I’ve created such a labor-intensive process for myself.<sup>12</sup> I finally dragged myself in front of the mirror and came to a better understanding of my intentions, as will be elaborated on in detail throughout this document.

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<sup>9</sup>“Conservation” is the care and protection of resources so that they can persist for future generations.” (National Geographic)

<sup>10</sup> “Continued human population growth has led to unsustainable rates of consumption of our natural resources, resulting in a loss of Earth’s biodiversity.” (National Geographic).

<sup>11</sup> “Original and pure; not spoiled or worn from use” (Cambridge Dictionary).

<sup>12</sup>In fact, this paper has existed in two quite different iterations. This is the latter.

## Research: Coast Salish Territories, Walking and the Value of Biophilia

Over the last year and a half, I've spent time exploring the forest and shoreline ecosystems that exist within the Coast Salish territories. The first thing I discovered when I stepped into the woods was an explosion in scale. I was used to the smaller pine forests of eastern North Carolina where the tallest trees reach just over 100ft. In North Vancouver, even the smallest second-growth trees lord over the wildest parts of North Carolina's National Parks.

When able, I spend my time hiking trails that cover the area from Horseshoe Bay, to the eastern parts of Belcarra Regional Park. These wanderings serve as my primary research method<sup>13</sup> as I build a mental encyclopedia of flora, fauna and the ways life grows, changes and connects. I'm intrigued by how plants and animals adapt and learn from one another, as well as the way I become adapted to a particular ecosystem after spending time there. Walking has allowed me to acknowledge my body in space. It provides me with an opportunity to study and learn from my surroundings as well as a chance to assess my position in connection with the presence of non-human natures.

My experiences within natural spaces, whether in those generally labelled as wild<sup>14</sup> or pristine or the more accessible, such as city parks, speak to me of companionship and connectedness. I feel myself a part of these spaces, and in my most solitary moments, am comforted by the myriad of life around me and the integral similarities between myself and these non-human species. This affinity for the natural world, and all other living things, is known as biophilia (Dictionary.com)

Biophilia is a cold, scientific word but it's used to refer to something quite warm and multifaceted in its value.<sup>15</sup> For me, as someone who is primarily solitary, I take pleasure in the constant presence of non-human life. It's a great reprieve to allow my eyes an escape from the

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<sup>13</sup> I am reminded of *A History of Walking* by Rebecca Solnit. She describes walking as, "ideally... a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together; three notes suddenly making a chord."

<sup>14</sup> Plants or animals that live or grow independently of people, in natural conditions and with natural characteristics (Cambridge Dictionary).

<sup>15</sup> As stated in "Beyond knowing nature: Contact, emotion, compassion, meaning, and beauty are pathways to nature connection" this word is part of a larger hypothesis known as the "Biophilia Hypothesis" which states that because humanity has been shaped "cognitively and emotionally over time through interactions with nature" we have developed "a need and desire to affiliate with life or lifelike processes".



hard corners and severe lines of city life and into the graceful, strange and surprising forms<sup>16</sup> found in organic spaces.

These spaces are mental, emotional and physical outlets. I've always considered the days I spend away from the city to be periods in which I'm able to reset myself. The demands of technology, work, and even my artistic practice, which is at every other time all-consuming, are stripped away. I'm able to reorient myself. When hiking, especially if the trail is hard and I'm hours out from the city, I enter a world with a single purpose—living— as I move from one place to the next. The episodic nature of my normal life dissolves and I can live simply and enjoy the other lives around me.<sup>17</sup>

Aside from my personal experience, engaging with nature is beneficial for the wider environment. Human beings who can feel a positive connection to nature are more likely to hold “pro-environmental attitudes” as well as a willingness to sacrifice for the betterment of a natural system.<sup>18</sup> As someone who cherishes the natural spaces I'm able to set foot in, this is an undeniably positive side effect of spending time outdoors.

As much as I feel a part of these landscapes, and want to explore the relationship between myself and the other non-human lives around me, I must acknowledge that I'm an uninvited guest here in the Coast Salish territories. These lands are not mine, nor are they those of the government that permitted me to come here. I appreciate, work on, and explore the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.

The spaces I create, and the elements that go into them, are influenced by literature, nature and science writing, as well as visual and non-visual artists. I take cues and expand my understanding of human relationships with natural spaces by reading work by fiction writers, scholars and environmentalists such as Stan Rowe, David Abram, Emma Marris and Jeff VanderMeer.

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<sup>16</sup> Elements of the “strange” and the “surprising” are going to become important later in the paper when I discuss my process.

<sup>17</sup> In “Engagement with natural beauty moderates the positive relation between connectedness with nature and psychological well-being” it is demonstrated that those who “engage with nature's beauty (i.e. experience positive emotional response when witnessing nature's beauty)” report “more subjective well-being”.

In “The relationship between nature connectedness and happiness: a meta-analysis” research shows these feelings are comparable to higher “income and education”.

<sup>18</sup> As reported in “Beyond knowing nature: Contact, emotion, compassion, meaning, and beauty are pathways to nature connection”.

With these influences, as well as a background of natural exploration and connection, I have entered into a new period of artistic production in which I focus on my experiences with my materials, the work in progress, and the final installation(s).<sup>19</sup> One of my recent works titled, *Cracking veins, breathing skin—wind* (figure 1) is an example of how my process has evolved from a preoccupation with a viewer's perceptions to an interest in expressing life as I see and experience it.

For this installation, I drew, painted, and cut out imaginary, segmented bodies of insects and arachnids. These were combined with a variety of botanical elements. Through this process, I created a range of insect-plant hybrids and populated a watercolour, paper tree with them. Within this tree, one is hopefully unable to tell what is an insect, and what is a leaf. This lack of ready knowledge is conceptually important to me as I try to embody what it means to grow, transform, and be alive alongside other living things, without borders.

As I've developed this process of installation and delved deeper into the impact I want the finished works to have, scale has become important. When I, or a viewer, walk into a room in which I've installed one or more of my finished pieces, I want to feel as though I've entered into a space that is overwhelming, infinitely detailed and in the process of becoming more so through growth and transformation. To an extent, this is accomplished through the size in which I craft these works. *Cracking veins, breathing skin—wind* is one of the larger pieces I've created. It's approximately 5.5 feet tall and 4.5 feet wide. I want to be able to walk up to my paper installations and feel as though they're as much a part of the world as I am. They are dominant in the spaces they inhabit and as they come together, and more works populate one gallery space, they sweep across the walls, onto the floor and through the air above my head.

Additionally, through *Cracking veins, breathing skin—wind*, I attempted to introduce elements of the human body. The trunk of the tree is distinctly unusual. I hoped to twist and turn the tree in fantastical ways and make use of a texture on the trunk that is closer to greying human skin than bark. This practice of including human elements, or parts that allude to the human body within my installations, is only just beginning. With the final thesis exhibition in mind, I am currently working on a large piece in which veins, human and non-human, play a dominant role. In the future, I intend to push these connections further. The more I can include elements of the human in my work, the more I believe human presence will be seen as part, but only one small part, of the larger ecosphere.

The ecosphere is one of the topics that ecologist, writer and thinker Stan Rowe speaks about extensively and has become foundational to my practice. It is a word used to refer to the Earth as

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<sup>19</sup>Each step of my process will be described in greater detail in the "Process" section



(Figure 1) *Cracking veins, breathing skin—wind* (2019)  
Paper, watercolour, watercolour pencil, pen, and nails  
5.5'x4.5'



one organism made up of an infinite number of smaller parts. I appreciate the sense of unity that is built into this way of thinking. It connects every organic and non-organic part of the earth into one inclusive, wonderfully complex space. This includes everything humans have learned to value, such as “untouched” (but very much still touched) spaces in National Parks, and the weeds growing in parking lots.

In the article “Ecocentrism and Traditional Ecological Knowledge,” Rowe speaks on ecocentrism or the theory that the earth, rather than humanity, is the “Life-center” and the “creative center.” It is important in my practice to consider, as Rowe states, the earth as “the whole of which we are subservient parts.”



(Figure 2) *Cracking veins, breathing skin—wind* (2019) detail

In my installation spaces, I hope the viewer feels as I do when I step into the forest or walk along the shoreline. I am, as they are, one functioning, “subservient” part of a much larger system of life. We live, interact, find joy and sorrow as beings among other equally important beings.

Lives, living alongside other lives which we may or may not recognize as kin. I intend to imbue my works with these feelings of kinship, as well as solidarity in the pursuit of continued life.

In my current body of work, I stretch my knowledge of natural forms and challenge myself to go beyond their basic shapes. The new forms of life I create have evolved into flourishing representations of the ecosphere, in all its infinite variations<sup>20</sup> that I, and hopefully the viewer as well, will find exciting, reminiscent of affectively poignant moments outside of city spaces, and as embodiments of connection, transformation and growth.

## Considerations of Space

As my work has progressed over the last year and a half I've turned away from using reference material and started depending much more heavily on myself and what I can imagine. But, I find it important to note that I am only able to create from what I know, and what I know is our world.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, when viewers observe my finished installations they can sometimes spot shapes they recognize, but everything has been expanded with the intent of emphasizing a feeling of wonder and joy and the potential of, and for, transformation. They come from a place in which there are no rules, except to move forward, change, and make connections.

One artist with whom I feel my work relates is Jenny Kendler. Specifically, I look towards her installation *Tell It to the Birds* (Figure 3) as an example of how artists can remind a viewer of their connection to the larger natural world. This installation is described on the artist's website as "[...] an attempt to bridge the experiential gap between human and non-human animal minds." Kendler created a "dwelling-like dome," with a shape suggestive of "animal-built structures".

Within the dome, there was a concealed microphone. A visitor was encouraged to speak into the microphone and "confess something to the natural world that they feel other people or the human world might not understand". Kendler utilized specialty software to "translate" the human words into "birdsong".

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<sup>20</sup> Examples to come in the three works presented in this paper.

<sup>21</sup> I have actively sought since beginning this project to expand my understanding of natural flora and fauna, as well as the more generalized patterns of the natural world, by studying plant and animal species from around the world.



When speaking about her installation, Kendler suggested that a visitor might want to “confess something to the natural world about our relationship with nature itself— to speak of a lack, a trespass, a neglect”. She is interested in the way human relationships to nature change as we grow older and she sought to remind visitors to her work that: “[...] nature is alive because we are still (and always) embedded within our animal bodies. We are blood, bone, guts, bacteria — we are multitudes, ourselves an ecosystem — mortal and fully animal, no matter how our culture may try to ignore this fact.” I agree with the way Kendler considers human experience as it shifts through time and age. Also, her position about the need to reconsider one’s place within the larger ecosphere.



(Figure 3) Jenny Kendler, *Tell it to the Birds*

It was while thinking about spaces, and the creation of new and strange ones that depict interconnectivity, that I realized there was a deep source of inspiration I could mine—my appreciation for the worlds of science fiction and speculative fiction.

I was raised by book and movie lovers. My parents were Trekkies, and taught me from a young age to idealize worlds like those conceived by Gene Roddenberry<sup>22</sup>. A love for these other worlds, and the strange people and creatures they contained permeated my youth. I only now recognize the beauty and deeper possibility in their pioneering societies. In the many different series of *Star Trek*, there is at the root of the protagonists' intent a desire for coexistence. Species, races, genders— animal, human, or android— none of that matters. It is a desire to live among and connected to other lives that is at the forefront of the *Star Trek* books, television series, and movies.

I realized late in my experience within the MFA program that there were no limits to what could draw inspiration from. I know now that tapping into science fiction is one more important source that fuels my practice.

When I consider the spaces that I'm creating or those I want to create in the future, I find myself returning to fantastical and surprising stories of first contact. I consider the alien landscapes of the film *Avatar* and the speculative and mind-boggling possibilities introduced at the end of Arthur C. Clarke's genre-changing of 2001: A Space Odyssey. I am intrigued by the complex worlds created in novels such as Robert A. Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land and Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? by Philip K. Dick, as well as its much more famous film adaption, *Blade Runner*.

These movies, television shows and novels speak to me of the fantastical. They encourage me to push myself beyond that which I know and tap into the colours, shapes, and forms of the strange and unusual. When working on this thesis project I made choices based on this encouragement. I sought out bright, whimsical, and joyful colours, patterns, and designed complicated life forms to convey something of the joy and possibility I feel in natural spaces and when engaging with the content of the science fiction genre.

Some of the most influential works of fiction I read while working on my thesis project were Jeff Vandermeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy, specifically the novel Annihilation. The series chronicles the endeavours of human beings who penetrate a closed-off ecosystem. With this portion of land separated from the rest by a massive mystical wall, a transformation occurs within.

Growth is expedited and sent on baffling trajectories. VanderMeer creates a world within a world that breaks natural laws, and expands and changes without restrictions. Some of these changes are undeniably beautiful, others are horrifying and deadly. Despite the inevitable tragedies that

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<sup>22</sup> The creator of Star Trek.

occur in the novels, everything that happens within this plot of land, referred to as Area X, is remarkable.

The scientists who investigate Area X are baffled and become obsessed with the novel ways in which plants and animals merge (share features, as well as grow into and out of one another), transform, take on human characteristics, and learn. Throughout the novel, the researchers attempt to control, understand and restrain Area X's growth. This only results in their drawing closer to the organisms and the larger ecosystem they're investigating. Some disappear into its depths, willingly consumed by other awe-inspiring, sentient lifeforms while others are driven mad by the undeniable, otherworldly presence that resides at the heart of Area X.

I take inspiration most directly from the feeling the spaces within Area X evoke, ones of mystery, connectivity and transformation. VanderMeer's main character, a nameless female biologist, when speaking about her journey through the novel ecosystem described it as:

"[...] walking forever on the path from the border to base camp. It is taking a long time, and I know it will take even longer to get back. There is no one with me. I am all by myself. The trees are not trees the birds are not birds and I am not me but just something that has been walking for a very long time [...]"

She, along with the other scientists, lost themselves in the evolving chaos of Area X. They became a part of the ecosystem in a way they could never have imagined before entering into it. So too do I want to utilize my installations to create an all-consuming world that appears to learn, grow and change before a viewer's eyes, adopt characteristics of its neighbouring life forms, and even the human viewer standing before it.

The *Southern Reach* trilogy, as well as the other works of fiction mentioned in this paper have something in common: an investigation of the unknown. A journey into a world that's surprising, emotionally affective, and just recognizable enough for the human onlooker to feel a connection. These places allow us as viewers and readers to know despite our surface-level differences, there is a vibrating thread of aliveness that runs through and connects all species, on Earth or any other world, real or imagined. I would like to imbue my installations with this liveliness and allow my viewers a chance to question their place in the hierarchy of unknown natural spaces.

It is not just writers and visual artists I've learned from and found myself challenged by. I would be doing a disservice to my practice and my transformation as an artist if I did not consider the influence that David Bowie and his vast oeuvre of music has had on the way I work. It has been through the consumption and adoration of his joy-filled and often sci-fi inspired albums that I



learned what it means to accept change not just as a necessity, but as something beautiful and worth pursuing.

Approximately a year ago, after I engulfed myself in his body of work, I realized there was more to be gained by taking risks, making bold choices and pushing myself, than there was in remaining in a familiar world I knew I could control. It was with his direction that I allowed myself to put aside well-worn concepts and consider my personal connection to my practice. Just as through his music he created a new landscape for himself in amongst the dreary sights of the late-sixties post-hippie boom, I have shaped a world of possibility in my own.

Bowie transitioned from one style, fashion, and personality to the next, showing himself to be an incredible, multifaceted artist unafraid to face criticism in the pursuit of what he knew was the next step in his artistic growth. I have come to admire his willingness to transform. He shifted from one vibrant iteration of himself to the next, taking his musical style along with him.

Among his many changes was a consistent interest in science fiction, what it means to feel alien or to be a stranger in a strange land. He understood and conveyed through songs like “Sunday” and “Memory of a Free Festival” what it feels like to live in “times such as these” and embrace encounters with the strange.

I’ve found in David Bowie’s music a fearlessness and willingness to engage with themes similar to those which I have touched on throughout my thesis project. I try to embody my installations with the same feeling of liveliness through transformation (as seen through subject matter and material) and a joy of engagement with the possible and impossible. In my work, one shape becomes another, referencing the patterns of natural spaces, known and unknown forms, and always alluding to a future that’s very different, but no less wonderful, than the present and past.

My consideration of space, human and non-human interaction and transformation would not be the same without the influence of Jenny Kendler, Jeff VanderMeer, David Bowie and the broader influence of science fiction. These artists and writers provided me with the push I needed to embrace the affective nature of my works and value my own experiences within natural spaces. For the next few pages, I would like to dedicate the bulk of my paper to my process. I’ve chosen to take this step to adequately address the considerations I make along the way, as well as delve into the ecosystem-like qualities of my practice.



(Figure 4) *The humming of little legs wings-beating water air* (2019)  
Paper, watercolour, watercolour pencil, pen, clay, glue, and nails  
6'x2.5'



## Process in Practice

No matter the combinations, extensions or elaborations I come up with for my natural forms, they always have a few things in common. They live, they change, and they seek to depict moments of awe and wonder in nature. It's important when I begin mapping out an installation to consider the larger form I want to create on the wall, ceiling or floor. This comes to me as I envision my reaction to the work (if it was complete). I often ask myself, what would I feel if I came upon this installation? What would it remind me of? Would it convey the principles that are so important to the spaces I'm striving to construct?



(Figure 5) *The humming of little legs wings-beating water air detail*

When I begin drawing, I consider these questions and how they apply to my own understanding of form and my body's interaction with form. As I draw, I seek to seize upon my past experiences and channel the lively feeling of twisting, ever-changing nature into my imagery. It is my goal to create images that appear to be shifting and transforming. Through these images, my mark-making, and compositional choices, I would like to create an image of the natural world that is in

flux rather than frozen in graphite. I hope my installations as a whole will speak to this even more clearly.

When selecting paper, I always make use of any leftover pieces I have from previous works. This means that the paper I'm drawing on is often an unusual size and shape. Sometimes, those sizes force me to make different decisions than I might have naturally done. I believe this process of working from leftover paper, in addition to new sheets, makes my hand and gestures more spontaneous. This technique speaks to the reactive installation process that is elaborated on later in the text, as well as the cyclical process of creating, discarding, rejuvenating and reusing at the heart of my art-making practice.

When it comes to painting, I've chosen to make use of watercolour. I take pleasure in the unpredictable nature of the paint. No matter how prolific I become at its manipulation, at times it seems to move of its own accord. The opacity and translucency vary, the layers dry unevenly, and colours are more often than not inconsistent with that which was advertised. I have to think on my toes, make decisions in the moment and act reactively. I always try to utilize this to my advantage and embrace the unforeseeable outcomes.

For an example of how I've used painting in my art practice to merge, enhance and prolong my emotional connection to natural spaces, I look to another recent work titled *The humming of little legs wings-beating water air*. In one portion of this installation, I considered what it would mean to combine two very different, but living, elements. I used the general shape of shelf fungus, but rather than making use of the natural browns and greens found in nature, I chose to take my inspiration from the shapes, colours, and textures of the shoreline, with overlapping rocks, sand, and waves. By painting the movement of the water on the shore, as well as the colours and patterns that are left behind (through the discolouration and shape of rocks, sand and stone), I tried to make visible the vicissitudes of time and the possibilities inherent in changing tides.

When a form is painted to my satisfaction, and all the details I want to achieve are complete, I let it dry and turn to pen. By using a pen I'm able to add layers of texture and interest to the shapes. For example, on one small flower, a few stray marks might be enough to give it an added layer of dimension, but on a larger work, I can spend hours meditating on a single piece, trying to figure out what else it needs, and how the life form might be further accentuated. By doing so, every lovely, skin tingling and squirm-inspiring bump, crease, and wrinkle will be clearly defined when it's finally on the wall.

I consider the utilization of clay to be an emergent part of my practice. It was fairly recently I concluded that adding clay sculptures into my installation could increase my ability to accurately and substantially conceive of three-dimensional forms. For example, I found myself recently





(Figure 6) One piece of *Cracking veins, breathing skin—wind in progress*

wanting to depict one creature emerging from the centre of a fruit-like plant. It came to me that the best way to accomplish this would be through using clay in addition to the paper. Since then

I've been experimenting with the ways that clay and paper can come together to speak to the layers of my ecosystems. (Clay elements can be seen in figure 5.)

In terms of the treatment of clay, I let it air dry, and then cover it with a cold press watercolour ground. This means that when dry, the clay is covered in a texture that varies between looking like hair, dirt or bark. Then, I can return to my watercolours and paint the clay forms exactly as I would if they were made of paper.

In regards to the paper, it is after the pen is applied that I begin cutting. Depending on the shapes, this part of the process can be the longest and the most time-consuming. I can spend all day working on a single sheet of paper, trying to remove the negative space without deconstructing the painted areas. By choosing to cut out the individual paper pieces that make up the final installations I've given myself the power to make more additions and subtractions. I'm able to cut away portions of the forms I've grown uncomfortable with, and even cut apart and put back together, with paper tape and glue, parts that I never intended to have next to one another.

When working this way, hunched over my desk, with both hands and wrists aching from gripping the paper and the handle of the X-acto knife, I think a lot about time and how it fits into my practice. From beginning to end, one finished installation can take weeks of six-hour days, or even months. I started to ask myself why this was important to me. Why do I enjoy this time-consuming process and why does it make sense for my practice? Surely (as I have been told), there has to be a faster way to get a similar result?<sup>23</sup> I've heard out these arguments, from myself and others and have come to the conclusion that without my hand intimately involved in every step of the process I lose my role in its creation.<sup>24</sup>

These works are about my relationship to natural spaces and my desire to continue that relationship after an excursion into the woods or to the shoreline is complete. Therefore, to lose my hand in this process, would be to sever my relationship and cut the line that connects me to the spaces from which I was originally energized.

While the previous steps are time-consuming, the next part can be the most intensive. I consider the various pieces of my installation and the ways they overlap one another. In some cases, I have as many as five different layers I want, one on top of the other, on the wall. When I'm ready to start the final phase, I take all the pieces down and lay them out on the floor. From there, I'm able to attach a nail, pin or wire to the back of each piece, depending on where (and at what depth) I want to install it.

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<sup>23</sup> More often than not, someone else is posing this question, often implying the laser cutter would be a better choice.

<sup>24</sup> Not to mention losing all feeling of spontaneity.





(Figure 7) Compost box of temporarily discarded paper

My choices while I install are almost entirely reactive. When the pieces are mounted on the wall, I know that any designs I had about the outcome are going to dissolve. I start with the layer with the least depth and hammer the paper with a soft mallet until it is where I want it. After finishing





(Figure 8) *Burrowed with sun skin and new days* (2019)  
Paper, watercolour, watercolour pencil, pen, glue, and nails  
6''x4'



the first layer I move on through the second, the third, and so on until every piece of watercolour paper and clay<sup>25</sup> is on the wall.

The paper I use is malleable, therefore it can be bent and woven in with other sheets. For example, if one piece of paper has two nails on it, one on either side, I can hammer one nail deeper into the wall than the other to increase the feeling of movement. I could also bring the nails closer together than they should be, distorting my original form, forcing the paper to press out from the wall, bending itself into various waving and twisting shapes. This factor of my process allows me to make it seem as if the pieces are moving or even growing as a viewer observes them. Additionally, through the processes of overlapping and interweaving, I can make the forms seem as interconnected as possible.

This feeling of growth is crucial. Through the manipulation of my materials, and the vibrant liveliness I imbue my creations with, I am trying to recreate for myself a world of living, changing, and free lifeforms. As the installation goes onto the wall, I can move the individual

pieces around, take them away and even add into the growing work painted paper cut-outs from other previous pieces that had been temporarily discarded. The very last step of my process is to choose and direct the lighting. The more shadows that a piece can cast the more complicated it seems. From a viewer's perspective, the pieces can appear doubled or tripled, and their complexity is increased. The shadows propel my works out of the two-dimensional world and into the three-dimensional.

This was the case with one of my recently completed pieces, *Burrowed with sun skin and new days*. This piece is also an important example of where my work started and where it is now, in addition to how I use and reuse materials in a mimicking of the natural recycling of life and death within the larger world.

### ***Burrowed with sun skin and new days* and Reuse of Past Works**

When I first started working on the piece that would become *Burrowed with sun skin and new days* (figure 8) my goal was to make as many cut out paper pieces as possible, all of which would resemble branches, leaves, and grasses. But, months after I started it, my work had changed directions. I became interested, as I am now, in alluding to an interior ecological relationship at the heart of each of my installations, in addition to creating awe-inspiring mini-

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<sup>25</sup> When it comes to hanging clay I take two different approaches. First, utilizing prepared holes on the back of sculptures, or placing nails in specific locations in order to support heavier forms. These are disguised with watercolour gesso and paint so that they blend in with the clay.

worlds to explore. Therefore, I decided to go beyond the shapes I had been creating and include different, colourful and amorphous organic life forms. This was the perfect opportunity to make use of the collection I've amassed of discarded, previously painted and cut out forms.<sup>26</sup>

The pieces I picked were altered to fit into this installation. This meant cutting them apart, repainting, and adding more pen (and sometimes tossing back into the box). By the end, I had taken parts from four different previous unsuccessful installations to complete, what I believe to be the successful, *Burrowed with sun skin and new days*. By physically transforming my



(Figure 9) David Altmejd *Untitled* (2006)  
*Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is a sculpture of a head that appears to be both animal/human.*

materials, taking apart old work and reusing the pieces for new works, I can act as an ecosystem and recycle my parts for the next life form.

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<sup>26</sup> These temporarily discarded pieces live in a box in my studio I fondly refer to as my compost bin.

The affective nature of these spaces feels similar to that created by Jenny Kendler, but they are populated by life forms that I feel are even more related to those crafted by David Altmejd. His manner of production has been extremely influential in my understanding of how the arrangement of various elements, conceptual and physical, can be broken down and reconstructed. The multidisciplinary nature of Altmejd's work evokes a strangeness and wonder in its blurring of distinct surfaces, human and animal features, and imaginary anatomies. Particularly I find a link between his series of semi-human sculptures such as *Untitled*, 2006 (figure 9). His pieces are extraordinarily complicated and layered. Each addition to the initial form adds another awe-inspiring detail that is at times both disturbing and beautiful.

When speaking about his work Altmejd says that he is “interested in complexity as a form.” It is his practice to rely on his intuition rather than a specific intention in his quest to “create energy.” As I consider the impact of my installations, and the way they are beginning to function as ecosystems, I relate to Altmejd's description of his installations “as organism[s]”. When considering his work, he described the initial process as “making something” but then “at a certain point [the work] starts making choices by itself.”<sup>27</sup>

## Cycles and Changes

Due to the nature of my materials, my installations change every time I put them on the wall, floor or ceiling. They fall apart from overuse, I tear them while taking off the nails, I lose or forget pieces while moving from one place to the next. Sometimes pieces end up in the trash along with other paper scraps. This is all part of the world of ecological relationships I've been speaking about throughout this paper. It's something I've come to embrace as part of a cycle of life and death. I believe these factors only contribute to my larger goal of creating a space that evokes the same wonder I feel in my best moments outdoors, and one that looks as though it is continuing to change and grow before the viewer's eyes.<sup>28</sup>

The way I put my work together, as has been outlined in the previous sections on drawing, painting, cutting and installation is inspired by the way I consider ecosystems. The words that come to mind, and that I remind myself of as I'm thinking about projects, are transformation, interconnectivity, and wonder. I consider the depth of natural spaces and how all manner of life, no matter its size in human eyes, holds an important place in the running of that system.

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<sup>27</sup> As quoted on guggenheim.org

<sup>28</sup> A lot of the time, the work really is moving and changing as the paper shifts, falls and rearranges itself.

Each of my installations tells its own story but is also part of a larger story of interconnectivity. The works on their own, and when they are shown together, remind me of the small part I have to play in a much larger world, as well as the gulf of information that separates me from fully understanding the web of life and all its endless intricacies and possibilities. As I move forward into the next stages of my thesis project I intend to do as David Bowie suggested and “sail to the hinterland”.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the unavoidable circumstances of early 2020 that kept the majority of my cohort from being able to install our final thesis exhibitions, I have learned a great deal about my practice and where I intend to take it next. While I was preparing for this exhibition, creating new work and altering old, I had one immediate goal in mind: I wanted to enhance the way I engaged with those who entered into my exhibition space. I intended to create an all-encompassing experience for my viewers where the work appeared not only on the walls but also on the floors and hanging from the ceilings.

In my final thesis exhibition, which I was planning on titling *Movement under flickering wet skin —whispering above*, I would have had three walls, the ceiling, and the floor to work with. I intended to engage on a deeper and more thoughtful level with the human viewer. I sought to bring them, and myself, into a space of discovery, discomfort, joy, recognition and contemplation. It hoped that upon entering into the world I had crafted, viewers would be encouraged to reconsider, or at least question, their perceived dominant position within all natural spaces.

I planned on accomplishing this by allowing more entry points and connections to the body as one moves through the gallery. This would have been in addition to a greater emphasis and focus on my hand at work. I am present in my installations as the conduit between an experience and a reinvestigation of that experience. Through drawing and painting I am translating my affective moments in natural spaces into a language I hope others can engage with beneficially.

My final installation would have covered the majority of the three walls. I planned to reinstall the three works discussed in this paper: *Burrowed with sun skin and new days*, *The humming of little legs wings-beating water air*, and *Cracking veins, breathing skin—wind*. Among several other clay-based projects, it was also my intention to feature my newest, largest, and most complex installation on the central wall. While creating this as of yet untitled work I pushed myself to

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<sup>29</sup> Lyrics from the song “Red Sails” from the *Lodger* album.

consider how creatures and plants, both alive and dead, benefit from a natural process of recycling and rebirth. This work is reminiscent of a whale fall—the confluence of events that see the dead body of a whale fall to the ocean floor. Once settled, it becomes a place of community and nourishment where life gathers and flourishes.



(Figure 10) *Burrowed with sun skin and new days* detail

In this installation a careful viewer can see everything from a shimmering, half-dead snake and miniaturized marsupials, to mouse-like creatures with plant growths and a flock of bird-plant hybrids that populate the bones of the long-dead behemoth.

In addition to this larger example of a fantastical, and I hope surprisingly joyful ecosystem, there would have been scattered “scitterers” grouped on the floor. These paper and wire homes play host to smaller lifeforms. One would have connected, through tubular roots, to another wall-mounted installation. The floor pieces, as creatures in my imagined world, live as they choose, acting out a strange and entrancing dance of mutualism. I envisioned an installation space in which viewers could bend down and study the tiny spiders riding on the backs of these



bacterially-inspired scitterers and then trace their eyes over the shifting forms of my wall pieces until they were drawn to the ceiling.

From there I intended to hang shapes that mimicked the forms on the floor. These are microscopic lifeforms made macro. They range in size, depth, and colour but all are vibrant, intricate. They would've spun carefully from colored thread. Some sprout hanging tendrils that bridge the gap (almost) between the viewer and the life form's central mass.

I hoped that my final, collected installation would vibrate with its own unstable stability. Everything I intended to depict within it would have been in flux, traveling from one recognizable starting point to an unforeseeable future destination. There were no finished forms, compositions, or designs. My thesis installation was going shift, unwilling to find a single final iteration.

This feeling of aliveness I imbue my works with is a successful depiction of my experiences within natural space. Although at this point these works have not been installed, I can still feel their possibilities developing. I know when they do finally make it onto the wall, floor, and ceiling that they'll be a representation of my body's movements and experiences and engage with my larger ideas about what landscape, nature, and life can be.

My concept of space and nature, as mentioned earlier in the paper, first developed when I read books like Emma Marris' *Rambunctious Gardening* and others such as Ken Thompson's *Where Do Camels Belong?* I became interested in how various evolutions or transformations of a space (as I engage in through my process of reusing materials) can impact a human viewer and their perceived position in the created, ideological hierarchy of nature. This is something that I intend to continue pursuing in the future. I believe it to be a fertile space in which I can play with our notions of what has value in the natural world and what does not. I would like to further complicate my perception of what nature is, and my ability to spend time within it, as I move forward.

Through the process of my thesis project, I've realized that this work has been staged as a reaction to the environmental moment we are in. I present my thesis project not as an answer to the climate crisis but rather as a place of possibility. I am suggesting worlds and boundless organic life born from borderless encounters. I am asking my own questions about the future and then taking those questions apart, and asking them differently.

I would like my viewers to walk away from my installations reminded that they are alive as dandelions, white pine beetles, and crows are alive. That we are all struggling, thriving, and

transforming together in a world that's endlessly complicated, as fragile as paper, and as strong as we can imagine it to be.

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