

**DECONSTRUCTING AN ANTHROPOCENTRIC VIEW:
DRAWING ENTANGLEMENTS**

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ABSTRACT

The research done during my MFA program at Emily Carr University has focused on finding strategies in the arts that reveal unseen entanglements between human and nonhuman beings and how the 'act of being seen' can bring about changes in humancentric dominated systems. I invite the viewer to re-think and re-imagine our social reality, while becoming aware of the complexities of deconstructing an anthropocentric worldview, and the predicament of precarious populations¹ and the inevitability of extinction cascades. The artwork aims to engage the viewer to be mindful of the issues that arise out of the precariousness of our times that shape our shared conditions of living. I have been drawn to explorations that meld and transform materials that allude to "intra-actions" and "new becomings" by creating images on an overhead projector. Documenting degradation over time allows people to notice the changes instead of accepting them as the norm. The processes and materials used in the works I have created evoke a sense of living/dying bodies, tensions and entanglements, oppressed voices overwhelmed by dominant ones, and, through the themes of absence/presence, communicate the global loss of living species. A few strategies explored through my artwork include a shift in perspective, a change in experiencing time, remembering presences and documenting traces. These approaches raise questions around memory, loss, and the possibilities of re-making in the present with the acknowledgement of other beings, with the hope that in thinking differently will bring about a shift towards compassion and an awareness of everyone's responsibility in this collective trouble.

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I would like to show my special gratitude for my two supervisors, Ingrid Koenig and Gwenessa Lam, for all their feedback and generous support. I would like to thank my amazing cohort for making my MFA experience truly memorable.

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Introduction:

During my Master of Fine Arts studies at Emily Carr University, I have been investigating the openings art can provide in deconstructing an anthropocentric worldview. More specifically, I have been making alignments in my artwork that offer space to precarious populations² and address the urgency of the extinction cascades³. The ongoing environmental crisis is a complex and challenging subject to say the least and is intrinsically linked to the outcomes of human categorization and the consequences for the treatment of other living beings. My thesis research has allowed me to develop an understanding of the ways art can reveal the otherwise unseen entanglements between human and nonhumans and the partial futurity of living beings.

My current practice involves searching for artmaking processes that help reveal interspecies entanglements⁴ and that acknowledge the loss of life forms due to all the damage done by humans in the name of progress and profit. In engaging with the troubles created by neoliberal capitalism, I've found it important to find ways to make moves that counter the values put in place by an anthropocentric point of view. I became interested in exploring the notion of entanglements, as a way of thinking about the relationships between all living beings and the potentialities of organizing the world differently. I was moved by Isabelle Stenger's explanation of "reciprocal capture" in the essay, "*Shimmer*⁵: *When all you love is*

² Precarious populations are often at risk of violence and lack protection because they exist in the margins of society and are often forgotten/ignored or are invisible.

³ Extinction cascades is an event that occurs when one being's absolute death affects various other beings' likelihood of survival. Extinction rates are reaching ten thousand times the background rate leading to scientists calling this age the "Great Dying" or the "Sixth Extinction".

⁴ Entanglements refer to the connectivities of living beings while co-existing in their ecosystems.

⁵ Shimmer is a term used by Indigenous peoples in Australia's Northern Territory to describe multispecies kinship as a force of life.

being trashed” from the book *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, as “an event, the production of new, immanent modes of existence” (Rose 2017: G51). Rose, who references this quote, explains that all the beings still left on this planet need to find a way of co-existing with an emphasis on the importance of encounters and transformations, while steering away from domination or absorption (2017: G51). Within my research process, I have been looking into artistic approaches that create openings for these kinds of encounters and transformations as a way of creatively confronting the precariousness of the times.

Many complications with human-animal entanglements have been exacerbated by the unsustainable aspects of our capitalist system i.e., horrendous living conditions for food production animals, reduced land use for nonhumans, pollution, and extinction of so many vertebrate and invertebrate species, to just name a few. The artwork done during my graduate program has been focused on finding strategies to counter the normative ways of living in a neo-liberal capitalistic system. These works aim to reveal the unsustainable pace at which we live and facilitate my search for new optics of seeing and new ways of being. The framework of my art practice has been defined by my research and artmaking processes, which includes a lot of experimentation with materials; I am continually exploring what makes a shift in perspective possible: alternatives to an anthropocentric worldview that have the possibility of revealing the impact of the divisive factors⁶ put in place by humans for all living beings.

Clarifying my positionality and methodology has helped me determine where certain motives emerged and how my worldview has been shaped and continues to evolve. Over the past two years, I’ve been creating work that acknowledges the absence of other beings whose lives are entangled with ours. These works

⁶ Major divisive factors put in place include human language, human cognition/emotion such as empathy and guilt, human morality/belief systems and human technologies, etc. These factors allow humans to keep nonhumans in a subordinate animal category.

explore the notion of remembering their presence; an act of undoing to re-make relationships anew. I think this speaks to the complexity of cross-species interactions, as Karen Barad states in the work, *"Nature's Queer Performativity"* (2011), with intra-action⁷ there is the "mutual creation of one another" or entangled "parts of" phenomena (2011: 125). I appreciate that I am in relation to other beings and the landscape, as well recognizing our intertwined stories. My artwork is allowing me to think through the troubles of our times and to figure out how I want to act. When I let myself be more attuned to the interconnectivities of life, further potentialities are revealed.

My inquiries into human and nonhuman relationships show the interconnectivities of the fields of inquiry framed by feminism, decolonization, animism, environmentalism, and new materialism; disparities within power structures continue to exist by maintaining their authority over the oppressed 'other'. What would it mean to be human without needing to separate ourselves from the natural world, to create unnecessary borders, or to dominate? Bruno Latour's book, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (2004)⁸, has resonated throughout my research:

- Democracy can only be conceived if it can freely traverse the now dismantled border between science and politics, in order to add a series of new voices to the discussion, voices that have been inaudible up to now, although their clamor pretended to override all debate: the voices of nonhumans. To limit the discussion to humans, their interests, their subjectivities, and their

⁷ Intra-action is the encounter and transformation of two beings in a shared environment.

⁸ The book, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (2004) by Latour ignited an interest in me to apply for 2017 Prix de Rome in Architecture with the firm I was working for at the time. The winning entry, *Adaptive Boundaries*, allowed me and my colleagues to run workshops with other architects/authors/artists who wanted to figure out strategies on making the human built environment more inclusive to nonhuman beings. The book also introduced me to other authors dealing with animal rights such as Cary Wolfe, Peter Singer, Jacques Derrida, and Donna Haraway.

rights, will appear as strange a few years from now as having denied the right to vote of slaves, poor people, or women (Latour 2004:69).

This book helped me comprehend to what extent the hardships nonhumans face in order to obtain rights in systems that actively exclude them. It opened my eyes to explore imposed humancentric boundaries and to search for a better understanding of what co-existence could really mean. Through reading, writing, and artmaking, I have been trying to figure out what art has to offer to the discussion of human-animal entanglements and how art can frame the resulting chaos of our times.

Art Power

The work of new materialist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz explores the material and conceptual structures of art. In her book, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (2008), she offers new ways of thinking about the potential of art to perform the role of connecting cosmological forces, materiality to bodies and the way art can address critical problems of our times. Grosz describes the conditions that make art possible and addresses how these cosmological forces “enact and transform new ways of conceptualizing politics” (Grosz 2008: 3). I have been exploring through my own art practice how art, once it is out in the world, can have the power to influence the viewer, to inspire them to reflect on their relations with other beings, to engender in the viewer the emotions/sensations/intensities that will challenge their acceptance of the status quo, and to posit new political questions about the rights of the “other” (Grosz 2008: 3). Art creates an opening or impartiality between humans and nonhumans because art is not exclusive to humans. Art’s visceral affects on all living beings has a lot of potential as the re-linking factor between all beings.

In trying to comprehend the power of art and how it can help with urgent matters, the something-to-be-done, I am trying to create a space that shows the interwovenness of all beings and the way we are all implicated in our futures. For the Summer Thesis Exhibition 2023, I am presenting three new animations, (1) *Floating/Falling*, (2) *Folding/Unfolding*, (3) *Seen/Unseen* as well as a loop of four animations *Populace*, *Cycle'n'*, *Places Where We Were Never Meant to Survive I and II*. For the installation I want to create an immersive space that will incorporate different strategies for transforming the predominant anthropocentric worldview that I explored during my studies at Emily Carr. The approaches I incorporate in the installation use different optics of viewing – reconfiguring ways of seeing and listening. The installation is aiming to include different perspectives/narratives, new ethics of caring, and approaches which alter experience of time and active remembering – taking something apart to make anew. In the installation, I use evocative harmonious sounds-vibrations as they offer something so immediate to our bodies and reconnect us to the rhythms of the universe. The soundscape played throughout the installation space is a mixture of running water, steam engines, buzzing bees and heartbeats.



Fig. 1: Joyce Yam, Installation view of *Folding/Unfolding*, *Floating/Falling*, and *Seen/Unseen*, 2023. Photo: Joyce Yam. Used by permission of the artist.

For the installation (see fig. 1), I was interested in manipulating the projected surfaces, frames, and planes to create an alluring space for the viewer. I was intrigued by how Grosz speaks about architecture as a way to demarcate, entrance, or contain “cosmic materials in order for qualities as such to emerge, to live, to induce sensation” (Grosz 2008:16). She mentions the frame’s “most elementary form being the partition, whether wall or screen and how the wall divides the world on one side and creates another world, a constructed framed world on its other side” (Grosz 2008: 17). The installation creates interconnected moments of different worlds, human and nonhuman, by creating overlap of images and sounds in a contained space. *Folding/Unfolding* is projected on three floor-to-ceiling tulle screens, with enough spacing between the planes for the viewer to walk through and view the projection from various perspectives. *Floating and Falling* is set-up as an immersive installation, with the animation projected on a wall, alongside the projection from an overhead projector with a rotating prism. The colored “floating” light from the prism contrasts with the “fallen” light emitting from random pieces of mirror placed on the floor. Viewers are invited to interact and create their own images/shadows on the overhead projector with various objects provided (i.e. plant materials, plastic, etc.). I wanted the edges of this piece to overlap with the other two animations, so that the viewer feels the connection between the works. The animation *Seen/Unseen* is projected from behind a two-way mirror, where the viewer will be able to see their own reflection and the projection at the same time. By creating all these different planes and crossing human-animal perspectives, I wanted to create multiple points of entry for the viewer to see how entangled our worlds really are.

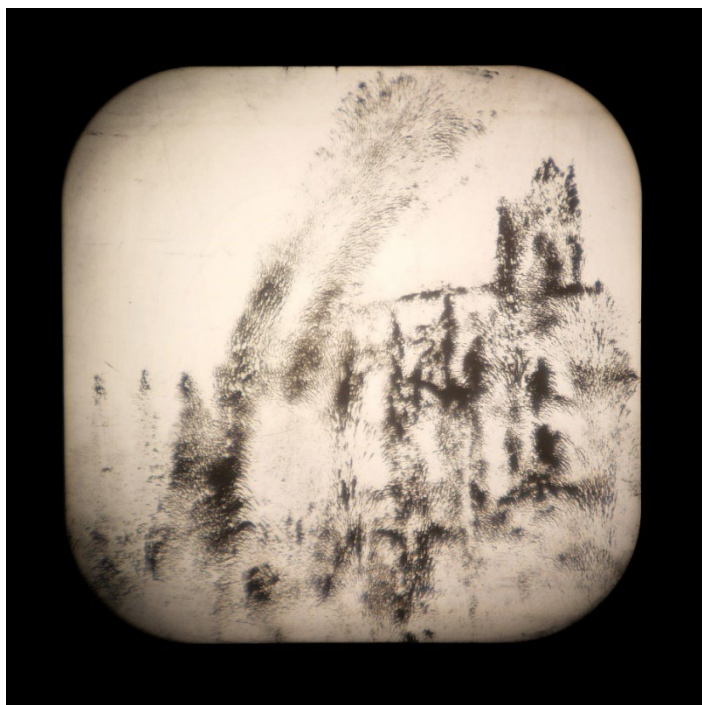


Fig. 2: Joyce Yam, *Floating/Falling Still*, 2023. Stop-Motion Animation. Photo: Joyce Yam. Used by permission of the artist.

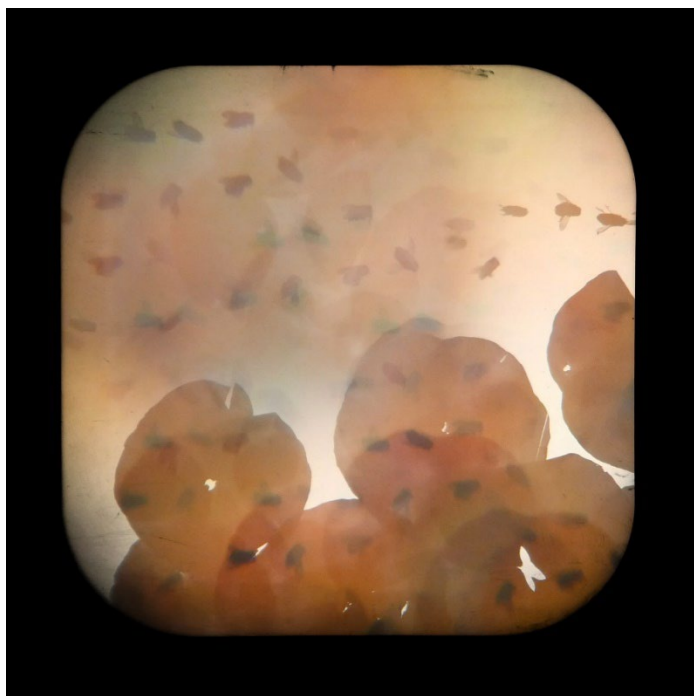


Fig. 3: Joyce Yam, *Floating/Falling Still*, 2023. Stop-Motion Animation. Photo: Joyce Yam. Used by permission of the artist.

The animation *Floating/Falling* (see fig. 2 and 3), is based on the idea of a bee's perspective, following its search for familiar shapes and forms, flowers, and their communication capabilities. I am evoking a sense of the connectiveness between humans and pollinators. The initial sequence shows bees flowing into a church-like structure. This imagery is based on the Rosslyn chapel⁹ which was discovered to have medieval beehives incorporated in the pinnacles.



Fig. 4: Alana Bartol, *reading wild lands*, 2018. HDV video 6 min 57 sec. Photo: Alana Bartol. Used by permission of the artist. Pending.

⁹ The Rosslyn Chapel was founded in 1446 and is known for its ornate stonework. During a major conservation project of the building from 1997-2013, it was discovered that there were approximately twenty-two stone finials that harboured active beehives. The cavities were incorporated in the architecture as a safe place for bees as they were considered sacred. There is a current project to incorporate beehives on the Chapel grounds to re-make the connection of historic buildings and pollinators (Rosslyn Chapel).



Fig. 5: Alana Bartol and Bryce Krynski, *all the roses sleep (inviolable light) (still)*, 20224K ultraviolet olfactory video, 1- minute trailer, full video 14:10. Photo: Alana Bartol. Used by permission of the artist.



Fig. 6: Marina Roy, *The Floating Archipelago*, 2015. 6'20'', six-minute animation. Cut adhesive vinyl. Photo: Marina Roy. Used by permission of the artist.



Fig. 7: Marina Roy, *Dirty Clouds*, 2017. Series of 84 paintings. Oil latex paint, bitumen, red-iron-oxide, and shellac on wood panels. Photo: Marina Roy. Used by permission of the artist.

During my research into the themes present in this animation, I have been looking at the work of Alana Bartol and Marina Roy, both artists who are bringing attention to the more-than-human perspectives. Bartol's work, *all roses sleep: inviolate light* (2022) (see fig. 5) is a film made with artist Bryce Krynski, using ultraviolet video and from a bee's point of view, a strategy I adopted as well. This work encouraged me to think of filming from a different perspective and suggested ways that I could change my approach to filming the stop-motions. I was influenced by the Estonian biosemiotician, Jakob von Uexkull, who writes about the lifeworld or *Umwelt* ¹⁰(Cited in Grosz 2008: 40). Deleuze and Guattari have used his work on biosemiology of animal life to develop "species-specific notion of milieu" or how particular species experience their lifeworlds. Through their intra-actions, depending on each being's interest, the two beings start informing and transforming one another in their co-existence (Grosz 2008: 40). A living being engages with certain

¹⁰ The *Umwelt* is the environment or model of the world in which a being is living and each being interacts and transforms certain aspects of its own world.

features of his environment that are significant to him/her, with its own organs and techniques of survival. It is interesting to think of every object and subject as having a different role depending on who is the perceiver.

In Bartol's video work entitled *reading wild lands* (2018) (see fig.4), she films the movement of a pile of iron filings as they react to a magnet. The three animations, 1) *Floating/Falling* (see fig. 3), (2) *Folding/Unfolding* (see fig. 10), (3) *Seen/Unseen* (see fig. 8), all begin with a sequence utilizing a technique of placing iron filings on the overhead projector and moving a magnet; the movement and lines created by a magnet are very distinctive and they reference unseen planetary forces. The filings drawings are present in the animations only for a moment and are destroyed as the image sequence advances. I wanted the images to evoke a sense of contemplative beauty while dealing with the themes of disintegration and destruction.

In contrast to Bartol, Marina Roy's artwork has shifted over the years from solely human centric perspectives to work which creates new meanings and possibilities. In her recent work, *The Floating Archipelago* (2015) (see fig.6), a 6-minute stop-motion video made by using vinyl cut-outs, Roy depicts futuristic origin stories, and questions the way humans would treat nonhumans even if we were all living on other chunks of earth floating in space and each island has its own ecosystem. I feel that Roy is presenting a world where pigs could be dancing when species-ism is no longer being enforced. There is a scene in the film, where all beings are being born or emerging from foliage, which gives a sense that all living beings are evolutionarily related. There is an overlying feminist point of view, highlighting the fact that feminists have been raising awareness of the problematic connections between anthropocentrism and the current ecological crises. In her work, *Dirty Clouds* (2017) (see fig. 7), Roy created 84 paintings using bitumen, red-iron oxide, shellac, oil and latex paints on wood panels. In the series she allows the different materials to mingle and organize themselves the way they want, creating beautiful patterns and residues. This artwork

dealt with the subject of anti-matter, which was initially inspired by the project, *Leaning Out of Windows* (2016-2020), coordinated by artists Randy Lee Cutler and Ingrid Koenig. The collaborative and interdisciplinary art and science project allows different disciplines to co-inform and transform ideas to offer new ways of being.

In *Floating/Falling*, I was interested in portraying the world in which bees are preoccupied by their survival; the colors and shapes of the animation emulate the perspective of a bee. The imagery alludes to the idea that beings have been transformed by other beings, and traces are left behind even though those beings are no longer with us. In the animation, there are snapdragons who have perfectly transformed to a bee's body. The 'falling' part of the film, where all the bees fall in a line, is hinting to an ominous future for pollinators, if humans are not more careful about the harmful chemicals used for pest control. This animation highlights the problems of survival if we lose important pollinators. It aims to persuade the viewer to re-call the living beings we've lost or are about to lose. We can better perceive the importance of present entanglements if we heighten our awareness of new multispecies interactions that may make the "ongoingness" of life possible.

Entanglements and the shimmer of life



Fig. 8: Joyce Yam, *Seen/Unseen Still*, 2023. Stop-Motion Animation. Photo: Joyce Yam. Used by permission of the artist.



Fig. 9: Joyce Yam, *Seen/Unseen Still*, 2023. Stop-Motion Animation. Photo: Joyce Yam. Used by permission of the artist.

In my practice, I am interested in thinking-through the impacts of erasure as an act of effacing non-dominant marks that are often forgotten over time and how these traces can be recalled and remembered. By looking through my art practice at these complicated relationships, I've focussed on communicating the feeling and conviction that everything is intrinsically linked. The animation, *Seen/Unseen* (see fig. 8 and 9), deals with aspects of destruction in the tools humans have created to control and dominate the environment. The initial sequence, made by moving iron filings with a magnet, is of an urban scene being formed and erased from the emissions of a smokestack, which represents the destructive nature of "progress" and the irony of technology. The sudden shifts in materiality and narratives aims to conjure various emotional responses from the viewer and to emphasize the tensions caused by certain human inventions that leave significant traces on other living beings. The animation brings an awareness to all consumable goods humans use and touches upon the rate at which humans are removing the surface of the Earth. The remainder of the animation juxtaposes different x-rayed body parts of a human with sequences of the use of different tools/ inventions that have allowed the human species to think they are smarter and better than other species.

The animation, *Seen/Unseen*, is trying to show how reliant humans are on technology and the sense of false security tools instill. This animation shows human intelligence but also reveals the issues of carelessness. I am hoping to create a heightened empathy and awareness of the state of other beings which is pivotal in these times by drawing the viewer's attention to the need to be mindful; that we are implicated in the same ecological systems and that we all have response-abilities towards each other. Donna Haraway states in her book *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), that "Response-ability is about both absence and presence, killing and nurturing, living, and dying – and remembering who lives and dies and how in the string figures of 'natural cultural' history" (28). I've come to the realization that there are severe

consequences to the way humans dominate and by doing so, have denied other living beings the rights to reach their potentials of existence and their roles in the ecology of the world in which we want to live.

Material Practice: Revelatory Mediums

During my studies in the MFA program at Emily Carr University, I have been drawn to the medium of stop-motion animation because of its ability to document spatial changes in time and to allow the experience of imperceptible forces. There are numerous possibilities of playing with this space-time continuum to bring an awareness of entanglements in the past-present-future. The individual physical frames captured by the stop-motion camera exist only for a moment in that exact material state before a change is activated by my hands moving the object and then taking a photo, thus creating these floating planes of composition.

The overhead projector is an intriguing low-tech, outdate machine that creates wonderfully alternate immersive worlds.¹¹ I was drawn to the potential of being able to animate a drawing by using simple additive and subtractive techniques and to tell a non-linear story by simply setting things in motion. The framing of all the animations is a square with four rounded corners and the shape appears to be glowing and flickering in the stop-motions due to the mechanics of the overhead projector. For many of the initial animations I made during my MFA, I photographed the natural image generated by the overhead projector with its monochromatic-sepia tone, which recalls old-fashion films and microscopes. For the later animations I made in the program, *Floating/Falling* (see fig. 2 and 3) and *Seen/Unseen* (see fig. 8 and 9), I experimented with color to give another layer of information for the viewer to read into. In *Seen/Unseen*, I referenced rose-colored glasses, to insinuate the general amnesia humans have towards our own

¹¹ An overhead projector has also been used by other Canadian artists such as Sarah Pupo, Daniel Barrow, and Shary Boyle. They all have performed their drawings in front of live audiences to bring their stories to life.

destruction and the color scheme for *Floating/Falling* highlights the fact that other beings see their worlds in different ranges, shades and perspectives.

In dealing with notions of spatiality, I was interested in analyzing the boundaries of nature created by humans. Deleuze and Guattari address the division humans have created between humans and nonhumans, they write that the “affects are precisely these nonhuman becomings of man, just as percepts – including the town—are nonhuman landscapes of nature” (1994: 169). It is important to identify the restrictive divisions of nature created by humans and the severe consequences for all other beings if they don’t conform to human conventions.

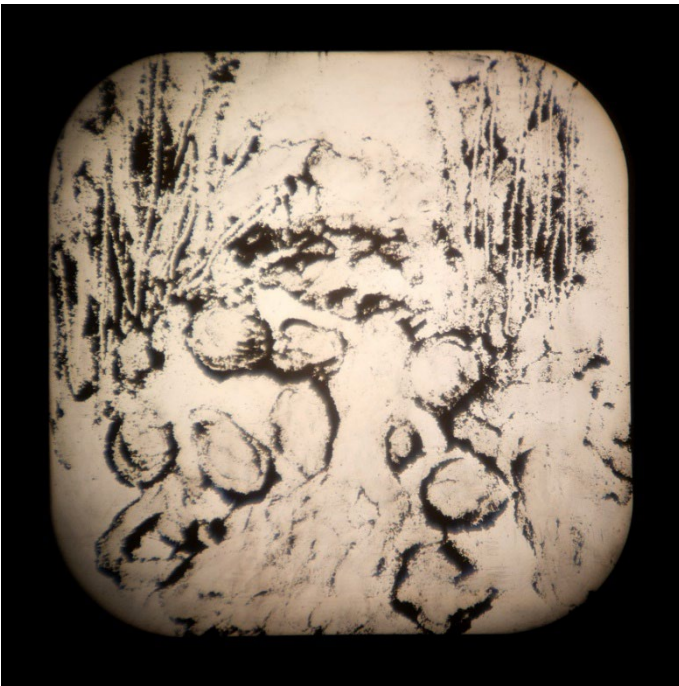


Fig. 10: Joyce Yam, *Folding/Unfolding Still*, 2023. Stop-Motion Animation. Photo: Joyce Yam. Used by permission of the artist.

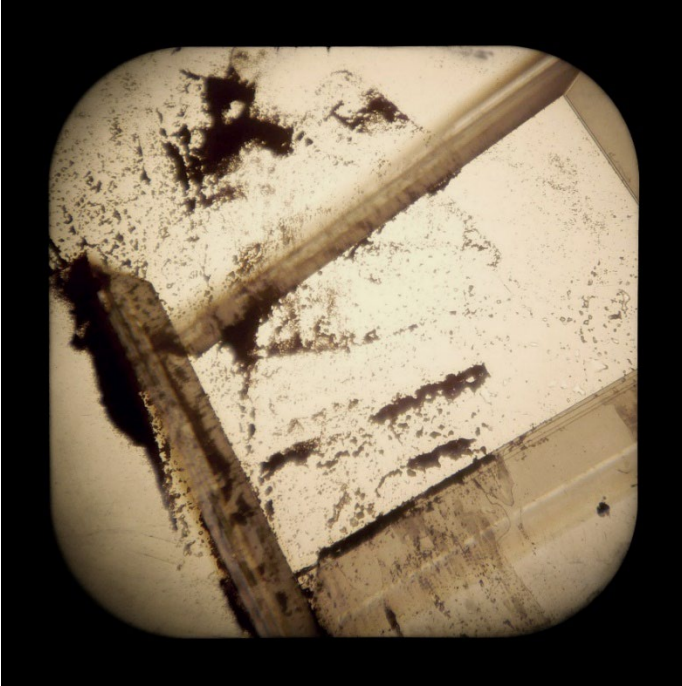


Fig. 11: Joyce Yam, *Folding/Unfolding Still*, 2023. Stop-Motion Animation. Photo: Joyce Yam. Used by permission of the artist.

For example, the animation, *Folding/Unfolding* (see fig. 10 and 11), addresses the reality that all living Golden Panama frogs are living in captivity in tanks around the world to escape a bacterium that is killing them off in the wild. The beginning sequence of the animation is of the natural habitat of the Golden Panama frogs with the water of the stream giving life to the rest of the greenery and disappearing again. The landscape is without any frogs, who later appear in the sequence when the transparent planes form a clear box. I wanted to show how the world of the Golden Panama frog has been changed drastically from what they used to know. The bacteria which is harmful for the frogs are being spread at very fast rates probably related to human shipping prerogatives. In thinking about “our shared time” on earth, the framework created by humans doesn’t allow any space for nonhumans to express their discontent regarding either the ‘time’ or the ‘space’ they get to spend on earth.

The animation is depicting the unbalanced power struggles between species by showing who gets to captivate who. There are boundaries being set-up by humans that do not ask the permission of any other living beings.

For this animation, I played with materials that prevent/permit light to pass through to give a feeling of inside/outside. I used transparent materials such as plexi-glass and plastics to demarcate spaces and to indicate fragility or imminent disappearance. There is something magical that happens when an object is placed on an overhead projector; details are heightened, and non-visible materials are able to be perceived. I have been fascinated by mediums that have an embedded layer of information and processes that invoke the experience of fragile memory; in recalling a specific moment, the image of what we remember is altered, deformed, or blurred. This idea comes together very specifically around art that explores the far-reaching impact of humans on the landscape. If art can remember and bring to the minds of others, the traces of what went before, it may help to create an awareness of the human tendency to just forget the drastic changes done to the surface of the planet.

My stop-motion animations offer a critique, an urgent concern that if the landscapes are shared, what right do humans have over other beings to change it to the point where it is unliveable. In many of the animations, I have been painting long scrolls of landscape with Chinese ink on transparencies that I use in repetition while filming one animation. Each time the landscape passes in a sequence of the film, it is altered slightly by the action happening around it. The dynamic objects have been dipped in a liquid so that the objects leave traces as they move, and then the dried traces are slowly erased in the film. I was fascinated in the representation of present-day lifeforms as living traces of other beings who are extinct.

In congruence with the stop-motion animations, I've been playing around with a lot of different art materials that offer different levels of detection and speak of non-permanence. I want the materials that I have been experimenting with to convey to the viewer that everything is always in flux, that certain conditions help reveal unseen forces, and that beings transform other beings. I have made works/tests with materials such as litmus paper, cyanotype, wax, liquid latex, wax plates with text to show the relationships between major diseases that affect humans and the closest animal pathogens. Contagious diseases reveal the interconnections between living species, from bacteria, viruses, parasites, and other beings.

As I was reading through the chapter *Symbiogenesis, Sympoiesis, and Art Science Activisms* by philosopher Donna Haraway in the book *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, I was introduced to the work of Lynn Margulis, who suggests that bacteria and archaea were crucial in the evolution of more elaborate forms of life. Margulis' work about endosymbiosis speaks of beings "becoming by living together" and how their cooperation between species allows for their survival (2017:M27). Margulis' research is a good example of new ways of seeing that change the way people understand co-evolution of beings.



Fig. 12: T.J. Shin, *View of Shin's exhibition, The Vegetarian: The Swamp & The Cross*, 2023.
Photo: T.J. Shin. Used by permission of the artist.

I also looked at the work of T. J. Shin, a multi-disciplinary Los Angeles-based artist, whose practice deals with entanglements of all living beings, and the many issues related to malaria (see fig.12). Through different installations, Shin transports the viewer through sanitation barracks of the Panama Canal to the different purification processes in spaces of contagion, including a room filled with the soundscape used to repel mosquitos. Shin is uncovering the connections between human measures used to control their environment and the socio-political impacts of attempting to eradicate nonhuman parasites which are deemed a threat for human survival (Shin).

Deconstructing an anthropocentric worldview

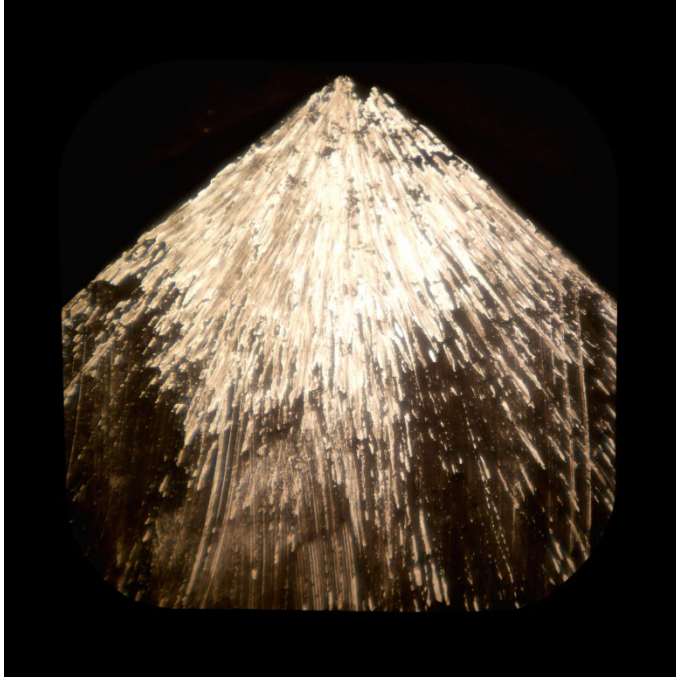


Fig. 13: Joyce Yam, *Places Where We Were Never Meant to Survive I*, 2022. Stop-motion Animation. Photo: Joyce Yam. Used by permission of the artist.

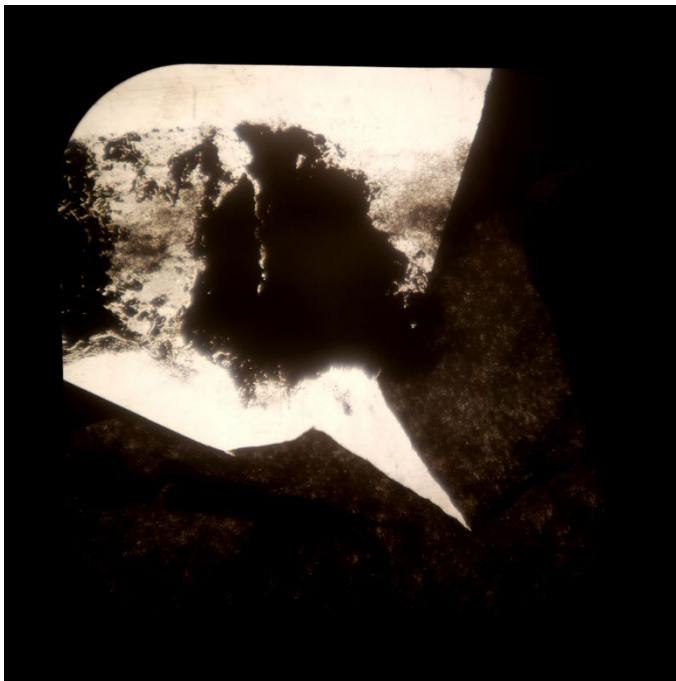


Fig. 14: Joyce Yam, *Places Where We Were Never Meant to Survive II*, 2022. Stop-Motion

Animation. Photo: Joyce Yam. Used by permission of the artist.

During the fall semester of 2022, I made two iterations of stop-motions, *Places Where We Were Never Meant to Survive I and II* (see fig. 13 and 14), that attempt to reveal the issues of maintaining an anthropocentric view and to engage the viewer in seeing their own accountabilities with the troubles of dominating interspecies entanglements. The academic influence for both animations is the chapter on Weather from Christina Sharpe's book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), where she speaks about the long-time suffering that results from chattel slavery in the United States of America and the short lives of enslaved people due to their insufferable living conditions. In the stop-motions, I am trying to correlate the ways that humans have been treated with the same horrible conditions as factory-farm animals; they are both treated as objects and as property. Since reading Peter Singer's book, *Animal Liberation* (1975), I have become very empathetic towards animals associated with factory farming and the horrific conditions they are subjected to as they live out their lives for human consumption.

The first iteration of the animation depicts a being entrapped in a space that is all they have known their whole lives. Slowly, through panning the dark environment, the being becomes aware of other possibilities of spaces that are revealed by the peeling back of dark layers on the overhead projector. I used a gesso coated translucency that gets scratched over time to reveal light and new possibilities of being. In the book, *In the Wake* (2016), Christina Sharpe describes, the character, Seth, in Toni Morrison's book, *Beloved* (2007), who has known freedom only to be returned to slavery. In this animation, I was thinking about the sadness of having one's freedom revoked so many times in one lifetime and about the continual struggle to reclaim it. In the second iteration, I still wanted to depict a being trapped in an environment but this time, the being has an awareness of other worlds and is constantly looking to live a better life. I used materials such as multiple layers of tissue paper, scrolling cotton clouds and iron filings controlled by magnets to

depict a sequence of a vanishing seashore. The sounds accompanying the images are of an earthquake, slow breathing, as well as sounds of whales coming up for breath. I was inspired to show the strength of a being that constantly strives to exist in a world of their own choice.

In the same book, Christina Sharpe describes, *Daughters of the Dust* (1999), a film by Julia Dash, that uses anti-colonial optics to tell an alternative story about slavery and the lives of slaves after slavery. I was drawn to the way she describes the film having the ability to:

“Establish for the audience its entrance into a complex visual scene as it interrogates established knowledges: the time when slavery ended, what the archives don’t record. The photographer with his optical equipment, the conversations they have on the boat, and the deliberate way the characters look at and away from each other prepare the audience for something formally beautiful and something that challenges their assumed viewing habits. The slowing down of some shots from twenty-four to sixteen frames per second is also a reconfiguration of ways of seeing, and in those instances when the film slows down, an additional space is created for the audience to enter the scene (Sharpe 2016: 126).

In my attempts with the two versions of the animation, I experimented with portraying the sentiment that all beings should have the autonomy to live the life they choose and that empathy towards other beings, human or nonhuman, would enable this outcome. In the first iteration, as the animation progresses, the frame per second slows down to alter the audience’s perception of time. In the second iteration, the pacing of the animation varies randomly to emphasise certain decisive moments and reiterates memories of the being prior to being entrapped in the dark including the rolling clouds and the scene of the seashore, giving the viewer the impression that the being is roaming around in the present, the future, and the past. The two

iterations of the animations are using the slowing and speeding up of time as references to alterations of the 'normal' sequence of the past, present, and future.

In my research, I have been looking for ways to convey an urgency to apprehending the disappearance of living beings. I was drawn to Avery Gordon's idea of haunting in her text, *Some thoughts on Haunting and Futurity* (2011), as a way of speaking about populations who have been repressed and exploited. Haunting closely relates to precarious populations, who are highly susceptible to violence and upon their death, become lingering omni-presences of the erasure. In thinking about how making art that has the possibility of showing these undetectable forces, I have been trying out materials that easily transform states, such as coconut oil and wax, permitting the viewer to see something new or something that was once invisible to them. Allowing stories of precarious populations have space, may allow people to see their own accountability in the system.

Gordon brings up an interesting point that "transformative time doesn't always stop the world" and that the work of emancipation must be done while "you're still enslaved, imprisoned, indebted, occupied, walled in, commodified, etc." (Gordon2011: 8). The term haunting calls for action or something to be done, which is a very important aspect in dealing with the extinction cascades; the ongoing crisis requires masses of humans to want to change. The medium of film is ¹²quite ideal for exploring the term haunting because the spectral beings (human or nonhuman) can pass fluidly through time, they can easily go to the future to remind someone of a past event and to tell their side of the story.

In my artwork, I have referenced haunted landscapes that carry ghostly figures, who are making their presence known and who are asking for wrongs to be righted. In thinking about landscapes haunted by imagined futures, we are reminded that extinction is one of the possible outcomes for us all and that our

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own livability relies on the reciprocal relations with other living beings. The archiving of changes is important so that there isn't a 'baseline shift syndrome' as ecologists are noticing in human behavior (Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt, et. Al., editors 2017: G6). This syndrome is behind the failure to perceive destruction humans cause to the landscapes which become the new norm underlying the next phase of destruction.

Precarious populations



Fig. 15: Joyce Yam, *Populace*, 2022. Stop-motion Animation. Photo: Joyce Yam. Used by permission of the artist.

During the spring semester 2022, I created a stop-motion, *Populace* (see fig. 15), which reflects my inquiries into the exclusion of nonhumans in anthropocentric systems and the denial of nonhumans to express or act on their right to their own existence. At the time I had just listened to Magnolia Pauker's lecture on "Precarity: A Politics of the Performative", which draws on Judith Butler's work, "Performativity,

Precarity and Sexual Politics” (2009). They both offer strategies to widen the field, allowing silent/silenced populations to take action and make claims, and hopefully to initiate systemic changes.

Butler’s concern is specifically with the silence that comes from precarity, a word she uses to designate, – “that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection.” (ii). This stop-action animation raises the question, how can art create space for precarious populations (humans and nonhumans) to lay claim to what they require? The work invites the viewer to recognize issues related to human imposed systems governing other life forms, which increasingly dictates the way they live their daily lives.

The stop-motion animation depicts figures that resemble humans walking on a landscape, soon to be joined by canine characters linked by leashes and bird-like creatures that are accompanied by ghostly flying creatures. I wanted to portray the complexity of relationships between humans and nonhumans and to suggest the tensions that are accumulating with concrete/abstract forms of social domination of humans. As the film progresses, all the beings become a jumbled, rolling knot, implying how intertwined all beings really are. The continuous landscape gives way to a ground that is melting away. The chaotic end sequence alludes to a juncture when the Earth is no longer able to sustain any more exploitative actions.

This was the first animation for which I made cut-outs of shapes that were made to represent humans, dogs, and birds. I had kept all the previous stop-motions more abstract but for this one, I really wanted to make it clear that I was speaking about different populations. I added the sound of a heartbeat that increases in rate as the film progresses: a heartbeat that is shared by both humans and nonhumans. I was

inspired by Jacques Derrida's lecture, *The Animal That Therefore I am*. In his lecture he speaks about the verb "I am" in French, "Je suis" with a double-entendre of "I follow," and to question who follows who? I thought it was a beautiful metaphor for human and animal entanglements and it led me to create the animation as a procession of accumulated beings.

In re-presenting and giving space to the nonhumans in my practice, I am able to bring about an altered awareness of who counts as a subject and who has the right to exist, to live an authentic and autonomous life, to have rights recognized, and to be given the space to exercise those rights. In recognizing the rights for nonhumans to co-exist on a shared landscape, there is a potential to better the living conditions for humans and nonhumans alike. I feel that in developing artwork about nonhuman rights, I am hoping to help viewers see the complexity of human exceptionalism and new ways of being. Through my artistic research I would like to tread this "new ground" where we can all exist with mutual respect in a way where we can move forward with dignity.

Representation

Many texts have helped me navigate the representation of nonhuman populations in a dignified way that does more than recall their pain and humiliation. I was drawn to the notion of wonder as highlighted in the symposium, "*On the Value of Not Knowing: Wonder, Beginning Again and Letting Be*" (2009), by Rachel Jones. In trying to make non-invasive artworks about the other, the notion of wonder and letting be allows the other to be themselves and to value their difference (Jones 2009: 5). It seems that navigating the grounds of a new pluriverse, where humans and nonhumans could act as equals can only be done by including multiple perspectives including nonhuman perspectives. Sue Coe's graphic book, *The Animals Vegan Manifesto* (2017), vividly depicts animals suffering in 115 detailed woodcut prints. There are images

of animals in cages, chickens in the dark wearing prisoner's uniforms, animals walking towards Vegan World, etc. On the one hand, the work's message of human cruelty is very clear, but on the other hand, I would agree with Jones who would likely find that the images of animal suffering simply reiterate their oppression. Also, in reading Gayatri Spivak's text, "*Who claims Alterity?*" (1989), many questions were raised about the predicament on being oppressed and how these populations want to be represented. I am wondering if through artmaking, one could show a world where humans are no longer exploiting each other and other species and if a legitimate but optimistic, or at least, more respectful shared landscape could be imagined.

This idea is explored in the essay, "*R-Words: Refusing Research*" (2014) by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. They discuss the right of communities to refuse to give information to social science research groups who fail to engage respectfully with communities and cooperatively establish research objectives. Tuck and Yang argue that "Settler colonial knowledge is premised on frontiers; conquest, then is an exercise of the felt entitlement to transgress these limits. Refusal, and stances of refusal in research, are attempts to place limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can't be known." This idea informs my animation, *Populace*, in which I was trying to represent different populations in relation to each other without creating a power/pain narrative or by depicting any populations as helpless or powerless.

In my work, I am finding ways of representation that do not fall back in on Western notions of power and do not reproduce stories of oppression that keep populations down and out (Tuck and Yang 2014: 227) or define them as other in such a way that they do not have the rights of humans. Jacques Derrida raises an interesting point about the animality of humans in "Force of Law", "In our culture, carnivorous sacrifice is

fundamental, dominant, regulated by the highest industrial technology, as is biological experimentation on animals – so vital to our modernity.... Carnivorous sacrifice is essential to structure of subjectivity, which is to say to the founding of the intentional subject. Within these stories of pain and suffering, one may reconsider how humans could treat certain populations if the animal was not presumed as a dispensable sacrificial body and that reconnection to our own animality could lessen the hierarchical structures separating out the ‘other’?” (2008: 247). As I continued to make stop-motion animations throughout my time at Emily Carr I became more aware that the way beings are depicted should allow for other species to speak, to resist, or to choose to not partake in human centric systems. As Frantz Fanon succinctly states in, *Toward the African Revolution*, “We revolt simply because...we can no longer breathe” (Sharpe 2016:108). It is important to recognize the struggle and to show possibilities of independence.

Mass extermination of others and its relationship to dehumanization

In the animation, *Populace* (see fig. 15), I am alluding to the problems of rising human populations and the rising populations of the species we deem necessary for food consumption and as companion species. The scene of the birds flying with their plastic ghost shapes refers to all the populations that are invisible to humans and are vanishing at an astonishing rate.

As Julietta Singh states in her book, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (2018), “The question of the animal remains a vital hinge between the post-colonial and the ecological that still needs careful consideration and mobilization” (Singh 2018:124). Singh argues in the book that the

concept of “mastery”¹³ has led humans to uphold the legacies of violence that hurt other humans, animals, and the environment. Karen Barad points out in the text “Nature’s Queer Performativity” the unjust way that the mass extermination of animals has become normalized as part of the human food production chain:

Given the usual association of humans with culture and animals with nature, one might think that forms of violence against animals perpetuated by industrial meat production—that is, the mass extermination of “others” made killable—would be seen as “acts against nature” worthy of our provoking moral outrage (Barad 2010: 122).

Extinction cascades, cycles, how loss affects the beings remaining – Invisibility- visibility



Fig. 16: Joyce Yam, *cycle'n'*, 2022. Stop-motion Animation. Photo: Joyce Yam. Used by permission of the artist.

¹³ Julietta Singh highlights the qualities and entanglements of mastery that have developed and been retained over time due to acts of colonization. Singh is interested in the question of “where, how, between whom and toward what futures mastery is engaged” (Singh, 2).

“The way you see the natural world around you determines much about the kind of world you are willing to live with. If you’re unaware of the animals’ past presence, then their absence will seem perfectly natural, and the question of whales in the future simply will not occur” (MacKinnon 2014: 37).

I have been thinking about extinction cascades and the issues surrounding this unrelenting event for many years and it has caused me to feel an urgency to do something both in my daily life and in my art practice. For the past five years, my family and I have been returning to a campground near Tadoussac, where the freshwater Saguenay River and the saltwater of the St-Lawrence River meet. This area is a generous feeding ground for whales due to the abundance of krill during the summer months. From the campsite right on the river’s edge, one can observe the whales swimming around looking for food and while sleeping in a tent, the sound of whales coming up for breath can be heard. I am always very moved to be in proximity with these marine mammals that pre-existed humans and am also filled with a kind of sadness, knowing that they might become extinct in their next couple of life cycles. I wish for my children to grow up being aware of their presence and to understand the reciprocal response-abilities beings have to one another.

One of the books that opened up my explorations of extinction cascades was journalist J.B. MacKinnon’s *The Once and Future World: Nature As It Was, As It Could Be* (2014). MacKinnon speaks of ‘rewilding’ as a way of reconnecting a network of nature reserves that reverse ‘island ecosystems’ created by human imposed borders. He also mentions that globally, we are approaching a ten percent world ¹⁴ based on mass extinction studies. This is the tipping point after which it is no longer economical for humans to exploit

¹⁴ J.B. MacKinnon argues that the decline of species and living systems is averaging around ten percent. I.e., Cod, swordfish, and great whales have been reduced to around ten percent, fourteen percent of the earth’s surface is protected from human exploitation and only one percent of the oceans (MacKinnon, 38). He highlights that we are currently living in the “sixth extinction” or the period of “the great dying”.

a species because they have become so scarce. Numerous readings on the extinction cascades have made me aware of my own blindness to the decrease in other species and the disconnected carelessness humans habitually develop while living in urban spaces. It is true that living on a degraded planet, humans have fewer encounters with other species and in a way, it becomes easier to disregard the vital interconnections between all species for inter-survival.

I created the stop-motion animation, *cycle 'n'* (see fig. 16), filmed during the summer of 2022, as an attempt to deal with the idea of cycles of disturbances and regeneration and questions of when the breaking points occur. MacKinnon states that “extinction is not mere death; it is the death of the cycle of life and death” (40) and the “current rate of species extinction is thought to be as much as one thousand times higher than the background rate through evolutionary time” (43). During the time of the filming, I was contemplating the loss of genetic knowledge when a species dies out forever and I was reading the book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) by Anna Tsing. In the book, Tsing connects the ecological crisis of our time to capitalism by telling multiple stories of the matsutake mushroom. The imagery in the film is heavily influenced by the text; the increasing intensity of natural disasters is due to the imbalance of ecosystems and the cycles of mushrooms that are the first to grow after complete destruction of an environment.

Traces - who gets to remember

During my MFA program, I have been trying to think through how to reveal the sightlessness that happens due to anthropocentric entitlement and the outcome of discounting the baseline shifts that occur over time. In the animation, *cycle 'n'* and *Populace*, I have tried to bring about an awareness of this mass ‘forgetting’ and to make evident the similarity of experiences of all species living in interconnected spaces. Currently the world is losing numerous species at astonishing rates and these extinctions are a multi-species event.

In Farley Mowat's book, *Sea of Slaughter* (1984), he estimates that the total biomass of North America's coasts may have declined ninety-seven percent through human hunting and fishing by analyzing travel journals over the last five centuries (MacKinnon, 18). Even within Canada, the landscape has transformed in the last 500 years and this transformation raises questions about how much of this 'forgetting' is voluntary or out of ignorance? Allan DeSousa, in his book *How Art Can be Thought: A Handbook for Change* (2018), speaks clearly about the control colonization narratives have over history, "The will to forget and escape are understandable, but we might also measure privilege by the degree to which we can forget, ignore, or be whisked away from the tragedies of others (including the privilege of being able to think of them as other" (DeSousa 2018:20). For the 2023 thesis installation, I wanted the animations to merge imagery not only from dominant powers¹⁵ and to see what kind of emotions are evoked in a space that is loaded with questionable futures.

Conclusion

"Art is this process of compounding or composing, not a pure creation from nothing, but the act of extracting from the materiality of forces, sensations or powers of affecting life, that is, becomings, that have not existed before and summon up and generate future sensations, new becomings" (Grosz 2008: 75).

The artwork I have made during my MFA program engages the viewer to be mindful of the issues that arise out of the precariousness of our times and the dominant traces of that precarity that shape our shared conditions of living. I have been drawn to explorations that meld and transform materials that allude to

¹⁵ Colonial powers have controlled history while the colonized populations, who were almost erased, are portrayed as less than human. Nonhumans also need to maneuver the force of humans to survive.

“intra-actions” and “new becomings”. I invite the viewer to re-think and re-imagine our social reality, while becoming aware of the complexities of deconstructing an anthropocentric worldview, and the predicament of precarious populations and the inevitability of extinction cascades. My artwork explores the different strategies art can bring to the public discussion of these ideas, with the hope that they will bring about a shift towards compassion and an awareness of everyone’s responsibility in this collective trouble. The processes and materials used in the works I have created evoke a sense of living/dying bodies, tensions and entanglements, oppressed voices overwhelmed by dominant ones, and, through the themes of absence/presence, communicate the global loss of living species.

In doing my research, I’ve been linking socio-political issues related to the failures of a neoliberal capitalistic system that provokes extinction cascades/destruction of environments, enables the commodification of other living beings and normalizes horrendous un(living) spaces for human and nonhuman beings. In making aesthetic experiences about nonhuman relations, I am hoping to reveal the complexity of human exceptionalism and new ways of being and knowing, while hopefully moving towards a new mode of being that allows us to exist with mutual respect and dignity. I am continually fascinated by the exploration of spaces where the hierarchal boundaries created by Western dichotomies break down, and the possibilities for a more animist worldview open up, and I have slowly been trying to piece together an artistic approach that promotes the inclusivity of all living beings. In future work, I would like to further explore how to create meaningful works that encompass vulnerabilities and acts of care that can address the damages and traumas of our times.

Reflection

The research I have done in the last two years is just a starting point for my art practice and I am content to be in a place where I can reflect on the experimental processes/work during my MFA. There is much more to explore in creating art that brings an awareness of unseen forces and networks. In thinking and writing about counter-anthropocentrism, it has unravelled a lot of the systems and beliefs I was taught as a young person. I found the subject matter very heavy, and the thought of an artwork inciting change is still daunting to me. Many of the authors that I cited in this paper highlight the importance of ideas furthering other ideas and taking care of one another, which I believe art can propel. Spending numerous hours thinking about the extinction cascades makes me realize my responsibilities to the younger generations and to all living beings on this planet who are just trying to survive. Art has always helped me situate myself in the “ongoingness” of life.

During the discussion in my defense, I mentioned art projects¹⁶ that I’ve come across that include nonhumans in a positive way. I feel that I will need to consider who I want as a participant and who I want to be as an audience in future projects and to wonder about questions of who gets the privilege of viewing.

Art can spark new ideas and that’s the beauty of non-linear thought. My artmaking process is very intuitive, and I often let chance have a role in mark making. In figuring out which images I want to create or the theme of a work; I do draw on a lot of personal experiences and try to transmit to the viewer some of the emotions/feelings I have lived through. In future works, I will keep on exploring some of the concepts highlighted in this thesis paper such as shimmer and intra-action. I am still very drawn to the idea of haunting and the potential of the stories being told by beings who are no longer with us.

¹⁶ The pollinator corridors or “bee highways” in Oslo, Norway and the Vulcan beehives created by the architectural firm Snohetta, raises social awareness of the importance of pollinators and the effect of colony collapse on human food production.

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