

## Unnatural: When Nature Has No Copyright

Tami Katz-Freiman

"Bold, overhanging, and as it were threatening rocks; clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunders peals; volcanoes in all their violence of destruction; hurricanes with their track of devastation; the boundless ocean in a state of tumult; the lofty waterfall of a mighty river, and such like – these exhibit our faculty of resistance as insignificantly small in comparison with their might. But the sight of them is the more attractive, the more fearful it is, provided only that we are in security; and we willingly call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height, and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us courage against the apparent almightiness of nature."

— Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, I, II, 29, 1790<sup>1</sup>

"Nature, after all, is the consummate people-pleaser – it is serviceable to anyone who wants to speak in its name [...] Nature cannot speak for itself, but everyone else is all too willing to do the job."

— Andrew Ross in conversation with Mark Dion, 1996<sup>2</sup>

For the past several hundred years, the intellectual history of Western culture has consistently defined the relationship between nature and culture as dialectic in character. Yet today, over two centuries after the appearance of the *Critique of Judgment*, it is difficult to imagine an experience of Romantic wonder akin to the one described by Kant. The sense of liberty embodied in the unmediated encounter with nature – the metaphysical solace of secular man – may still be experienced, even though it is becoming increasingly more rare; at present, however, it is inevitably shaped by man's desire to control, cultivate and preserve nature, for even the most remote stretch of wilderness – the frontier of the undomesticated and the uncultivated – is today managed, mediated, and cultivated. Indeed, it seems that the desire to preserve a

---

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by J.H. Bernard, New York: Hafner Press, 1951, pp. 100-101.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Jeffery Kastner, "Art in the Age of the Anthropocene," in Jeffrey Kastner (editor), *Nature*, London: Whitechapel Gallery: Documents of Contemporary Art, 2012, p. 161.

sphere that contains no marks of human presence embodies the promise of finding refuge from culture – that is, the promise of happiness.

Nature has always inspired artistic creation, while simultaneously reflecting changing human attitudes towards it -- ranging from mystical, Romantic approaches to ecological art and earth art. Nature has been viewed as a metaphor for chaotic, uncontrollable forces, as a utopian realm, and as the site of an encounter with sublime and majestic forces that provoke astonishment and awe; it has represented a mysterious symbol, an object of longing that bespeaks the basic desire to return to an Edenic past. Nature seems to embody all of man's dreams, as well as his worst nightmares. Yet the idea of an artistic excursion to encounter the real landscape has long lost its power. In the contemporary age of the simulacra, images of nature are recycled as part of a virtual inventory containing countless manipulated and reconstructed images of an imagined nature, so that it is no longer possible to distinguish between the real and its representation. The infinite power of nature, which Kant refers to as the "sublime," is currently mediated through images, films and television programs, while the sense of wonder we may still experience is based on an accumulation of countless previously processed and consumed images.

Contemporary theoretical approaches go even further, arguing that the framing and circumscribing of "nature" as a "landscape" is accompanied by a shift from nature, in itself, to a perceptual schema that is implicitly shaped by cultural constructions and conventions, which are either replicated or contested by the work of art. In other words, even when contemporary landscape imagery has a concrete referent in reality, it is nevertheless constructed as an imagined sphere, already existing as a representation before it is re-presented by the artwork.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> This argument is based on W.J.T. Mitchell's essay "Imperial Landscape," in W.J.T. Mitchell (editor), *Landscape and Power*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 5-34. Mitchell's essay relates the development of contemporary landscape representations to post-colonial discourse.

The complex relations between nature and culture are aptly defined by Jeffrey Kestner in the introduction to the recently published anthology *Nature*:

"Nature has repeatedly been rejected and reclaimed by artists over the last half century. Art that is engaged with it – informed by philosophical and political trends, by scientific advances and by the evolution of theoretical frameworks within the field of visual culture – has been uniquely positioned to benefit from the dislocation of disciplinary specificities. As forms of technology have made our interventions into natural systems both increasingly refined and profound, and advances in biological and communication technology have altered the way we 'present' ourselves, so too have artistic re-presentations of nature evolved."<sup>4</sup>

In the hyper-technological age, the concept of nature has thus acquired a new relevance that has led many artists to reflect ironically on artificial environments, where one is unable to distinguish between what is real and what is not. A significant number of contemporary artists challenge the traditional gap between perceptions of "nature" and "culture," suggesting that this reductive dichotomy is no longer sustainable. In many cases, moreover, they introduce new understandings of the sublime that replace its Romantic associations and the related sense of awe with a diverse range of critical, political, and poetic approaches.

One cannot imagine a more appropriate venue for this exhibition than Miami – which was built as a consequence of the large-scale draining of swamps into artificial lakes and canals. As a city in which nature has been processed to extraordinary degrees of synthetic cultivation, it is a site where the gap between the natural and the artificial has been completely blurred. Indeed, Miami may serve as a powerful parable for the unnatural. The palm trees on the golden ocean front, the hibiscus flowers, the mangrove roots and the pastel palette of the Art Deco buildings may be thought of as a glamorous façade, a stage set centered on simulating an experience of paradise on

---

<sup>4</sup> Kastner, "Art in the Age of the Anthropocene," p. 17.

earth. The presentation of UNNATURAL in Miami Beach – a subtropical, botanically lush barrier island that was built on a filled coral reef, and where even the beach sand was artificially imported – further strengthens the tangible relationship between “nature” and the “unnatural.”

The artists selected for UNNATURAL come from diverse cultural backgrounds and work in a wide range of media including video, photography, sculpture, and installation. These artists seem to be stretching the limits of time and place, while collecting and assembling imagery from different sources to create a new, artificial form of nature. As previously mentioned, their sources of inspiration are not to be found in nature itself, but rather in mediated, cultivated natural environments – landscapes that have already been experienced, conquered, fixed or classified. All of the landscapes featured in the exhibition may be described as imaginary ones. Some are based on concrete expanses of nature, while others are dreamlike, surreal constructions. A thematic examination of the exhibition reveals a heterogeneous range of images: trees and forests, fields and flowers, animals, various terrains, hills and swamps, and stretches of sky containing clouds, tornadoes, or supernovas. The mediation of these images, however, involves various types of manual or digital manipulation – acts of camouflage, the use of synthetic substitutes, and the creation of simulated environments, which shed ironic light on the relations between man, nature and culture.

The contemporary discourse on nature is interdisciplinary and undermines traditional divisions between different fields of knowledge: studies in areas such as environmental ecology, eco-activism, biotechnology, biomedica, botany and zoology, experimental geography and anthropology, alongside concepts such as extinction, biodiversity, and utopianism, have thus become an integral part of this artistic discourse.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of the artists in this show are Israeli-born – a fact that infuses their examination of nature with a political charge, while leading to a critical

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, the essays collected in Kastner, *Nature*, f.n. 2 above.

engagement with the concepts of territory and landscape. In the contemporary Israeli context, it is impossible to disassociate the landscape from its political resonances and from the multiple narratives that surround it. Landscape imagery and representations of nature in Israeli art are never ideologically innocent, and are certainly not Romantic. They are scorched by the fire of conflict and marked by the fervor of internal controversy. This context, where territory itself and the ownership over it are the source of a fundamental controversy, clearly reveals how every act of representing nature is inevitably political and suffused with ideology.

The seductive power of natural beauty is given expression in the exhibition through images of flowers, forests and vegetation. A number of the participating artists engage with the long artistic tradition of representing flowers, and especially to the tradition of vanitas paintings, in which the beauty of flowers symbolizes the fragility and ephemerality of human life. **Einat Arif-Galanti** uses plastic flowers "planted" on a bed of Astroturf to create a video-animation cycle of blooming and withering that resembles a still-life painting come to life; by contrast, **Michal Shamir** collected vestiges of real nature, which she carefully dried and scanned while underscoring processes of withering, disintegration, and decay; **Jennifer Steinkamp** presents cascades of flowers that sway lightly in the wind like an architectural backdrop, a monumental stretch of wallpaper projected onto the museum's entrance wall; **Gal Weinstein**, meanwhile, "draws" pine forests by laboriously gluing steel wool onto wooden panels and then setting them on fire.

Representations of flowers have a strong connection to the tradition of still-life paintings – an early genre of artificial nature. **Ori Gersht's** video work introduces movement into a still-life of a pheasant and grapes by the painter Jean-Simeon Chardin. In Gersht's video, the pheasant is seen diving downwards and collapsing into its own reflection, thus enhancing the affinity between beauty and death; in a similar manner, **Dana Levy** alludes to the tradition of landscape painting by using a crane to pull an ancient pine tree out of the depths of a pastoral lake.

The preoccupation with animals is related to a reflection on the uncanny and the repressed, as well as to the urge to domesticate and cultivate; in **Meirav Heiman** and **Yossi Ben Shoshan's** work, a sperm whale imprisoned in an aquarium that is too small to accommodate its size symbolizes the enduring power of a vast and threatening nature, even when it is fully subjected by man; **Hilja Keading** similarly blurs the boundaries between the natural and the fictional by examining the domestication and cultivation of wildlife, while documenting her own intimate encounter with a gigantic black bear.

Muddy terrains and swamps have special significance in this exhibition due to its location in the south of Florida. The symbolic charge of such areas is related to liminal states, to the abject, and to the mystery of a primeval, untamed, libidinal world. **Blane De St. Croix** presents a fragment of a muddy landscape that appears to be floating at the center of the exhibition space, and which represents the Everglades nature reserve in south Florida; **Yehudit Sasportas's** video is composed of a "patchwork" of images depicting European forests and swamps, which are combined with drawings of vertical lines. Spreading out among the tree trunks and invading the swampland, these lines seem to fuse the real, visible landscape with an imaginary, emotional landscape; and **Gilad Ratman** investigates an extreme case of the human desire to wallow in nature by documenting a bizarre activity that involves physically immersing oneself in thick, slippery mud.

The infinite expanse of the sky is embodied in this exhibition in **Wendy Wischer's** work, where a bright sky is reflected in puddles that seem to have formed on the museum floor; an illusory representation of the sky also appears in **Guy Zagursky's** work, where a starry night is magically revealed within a wooden crate used to transport artworks; stunning and impossible panoramas of supernovas – stars collapsing into themselves – appear in the digital montage created by **Boaz Aharonovitch**, which stretches the limits of the photographic medium and undermines its association with the representation of reality.

Another thematic prism through which one may examine the works in this exhibition is their affiliation with scientific, Romantic, poetic, and ecological approaches to nature. A scientific approach is evident in **Rose-Lynn Fisher's** microscopic photographs of bees, which reveal the metaphorical code embodied in the structure and surface patterns of the bees' bodies and their resemblance to creatures in a science-fiction film; a pseudo-scientific approach is represented by the works of **Uri Shapira**, who concocts various materials, encourages "natural" reactions among chemicals, and creates "metal vegetation" in aquariums; Tomer Sapir similarly blurs the boundaries between animal and mineral, real and fictional, by creating laboratory mutations whose degree of "naturalness" can no longer be determined; and in **Freddy Shachar Kislef's** work, the fusion of the natural and the artificial, the organic and the synthetic, is similarly embodied by the writhing mollusk floating in a pool of black liquid.

A Romantic, yet politically charged approach, is given expression in the works of **Richard Mosse**, who uses infrared film to transform the killing fields of Africa into a mysterious, exotic, pink-tinged terrain; a different kind of manipulated nature appears in the works of **Tobias Madison**, who applied expressionist paint drips to synthetic plants and inserted them into glass display cases. In doing so, he provokes ironic thoughts concerning new age trends centered on a green ecology, the preservation of nature, and the sanctification of the "natural"; a poetic approach to myths concerning nature is given expression in **Sigalit Landau's** video work, which features a watermelon raft that floats in the Dead Sea, unraveling in a spiral motion around the artist's naked body.

Photographic practices play a central role in representing nature, especially in terms of the range of manipulations they make possible. Technologies such as Photoshop, video, and scanning, alongside other digital technologies, similarly enable artists to create deceptive simulations and synthetic forms of manmade nature. **Samantha Salzinger** creates imaginary topographies of a mysterious and imaginary natural world, which she represents in the form of dioramas; Boaz Aharonovitch's supernovas are based on countless Internet-

based images; Rose-Lynn Fisher's photographs, like Richard Mosse's infrared photographs, stretch the limits of the photographic medium and undermine its association with the representation of reality; **Aziz+Cucher**'s works appear as landscapes culled from different digital sources and transformed into complete fictions; Ori Gersht's works similarly challenge the perception of photography as a tool for reporting on reality; and Meirav Heiman and Yossi Ben Shoshan's sperm whale brings to a climax the encounter between the organic and the digital, while entirely undermining the concept of the "natural." This creature, whose body is an illusion composed of pixels, is the most virtual one in the exhibition.

The works included in this exhibition all raise questions concerning the consumption of nature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the different manners in which man appropriates nature for his own needs, and the rarity of unmediated encounters with nature in the digital world. The painstaking artistic labor invested in creating imagined, artificial worlds offers a reflection of the human need to conquer and appropriate nature, as well as of man's helplessness when faced with uncontrollable natural disasters and other natural phenomena. At the same time, these works question conventional means and methods of representing the natural world and metaphorically embody both the paradoxical longing to fuse with nature and the threat embedded in such fusion. UNNATURAL also represents the far-fetched fusion of reality, fantasy and simulation. It reflects the freedom of the imagination and the wonders of simulation technology, which make the inconceivable conceivable. Last but not least, it reveals how the unmediated sense of awe and wonder provoked by nature has been replaced by the work of art, which enables us to marvel at the act of representation and to re-imagine nature, while celebrating the wonders of the human imagination.