

HUMAN | NATURE

Atom Cianfarani · Marie-France Giraudon
Johannes Heldén & Håkan Jonson
Olivier Henley & Laurent Lévesque
Shannon Lynn Harris · Gunzi Holmström
Angela Marsh · Nelly-Eve Rajotte
Curator Tamar Tembeck

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presented by OBORO, Ada X and GIV

The group exhibition *Human|Nature* addresses the many forms of relationships that human beings entertain with what our languages refer to as “nature.” Dictionary definitions of nature in French and English describe it as referring to parts of the physical world that exist “independently of human activities.”¹ Research on climate change, however, would lead us to believe that such a definition is pure fiction: after all, human beings cannot be separated from the natural world from whence they emerged and upon which they depend. This is why we refer to the current epoch as the Anthropocene: a period during which human activity has an irrevocable impact on the course of natural life. Although we may well still hope that the natural world will prevail long after humanity has disappeared from our habitat, the Earth, it is increasingly difficult in 2021 to affirm that nature is left untouched by human activity.

The works gathered in this exhibition are united by the fact that they each posit distinct forms of relations between humanity and nature. Whether they are oppositional, symbiotic, utopian or extractive, these relations are often based upon the implicit, though paradoxical, premise of a distinction between the two parties named in the title of the exhibition. The vertical bar inserted in the title can either be read as a division, establishing a more or less porous border between the two parties, or on the contrary as a mirror, implying that these two parties, in reflecting each other, may in fact be one. The indissoluble relationship between humans and nature reaches its apogee in our current age, when it has become clear that human activity not only derives from the affordances of nature, but that it also reshapes nature’s forms, cycles and systems.

The installations brought together in the exhibition speak to some of the actions that human beings undertake toward nature, be it material or imagined. The desire to understand nature, to reclaim it, to classify or to embrace it are all impulses reflected in the works of Angela Marsh, Atom Cianfarani, Laurent Lévesque & Olivier Henley, as well as Johannes Heldén & Håkan Jonson. A selection of videos from Groupe Intervention Vidéo’s catalogue complements the exhibition with works by Marie-France Giraudon, Shannon Lynn Harris, Gunzi Holmström and Nelly-Eve Rajotte. In witnessing the various perspectives that these artists bring to bear on the natural world, we can conclude that “nature” is also a chimera, the fruit of multiple projections of the human mind.

Upon entering the gallery’s reception area, visitors are greeted by Swedish artists Johannes Heldén and Håkan Jonson’s *Encyclopedia*, which consists in thousands of unique library index cards that contain the names and descriptors of as many invented life forms on the verge of extinction. The artists have breathed life into these multiple fictional species, giving each of them distinct characteristics and life spans, and randomly determining the lengths of their existence. If a viewer chooses to walk away with one of the index cards, then that particular species will never be seen again. A web-based version of the project is also available for consultation on a tablet. With each refresh of the browser, a new species appears and disappears forever, allowing visitors to play both God and human with a simple click.

In contrast to this clinical ordering of imagined natural life, Angela Marsh's project *This Work Is So Urgent It Must Be Slow* in the small gallery seeks to draw attention to the many forms of nature that are obscured, unnoticed or dismissed in our urban environments. Her delicate bubble wrap tapestries serve as dormant plantation beds for seeds that were drawn from plants populating vacant lots and abandoned territories. Each plastic bubble becomes a microscopic incubator for what is otherwise regarded as a life that is unworthy of our attention. The walls display paintings of these plants on refurbished MDF posterboards: "biophilic friche drawings," as the artist names them, that fuse urban and natural landscapes into one.

Atom Cianfarani's vivid posters and installations from the *Survival Quilting* series welcome visitors into the Salle Daniel-Dion et Su Schnee. While the protest posters on the wall invite us to "Consume Love," "Refuse Norms," or "Operate With Less," the sculptural installations distributed across the gallery are the product of the artist's meticulous transformations of post-consumer waste into large-scale quilts—an undoubtedly lengthy labour of love. Using tools and techniques developed by Cianfarani, single-use materials such as styrofoam, Ziploc bags or Tetra Pak containers are shredded and reconfigured as quilts whose patterns refer to urban industrial landscapes, while also recalling images of ticker tape parades.

In the alcove at the rear of the large gallery, Laurent Lévesque and Olivier Henley's interactive work *The Conservatory: First Ramble* invites visitors to travel through a collection of natural life gleaned from different gaming worlds. The pair harvested 250 plants from video games that were developed between 1997 and 2017. Their project therefore conserves multiple views of nature created by humans over two decades. The virtual greenhouse they created allows us to travel through time and to navigate through humans' evolving representations of the natural world in gaming environments.

A looped projection of four videos adds narrative layers to the portraits of nature brought together in this exhibition, with a variety of genres ranging from documentary to futuristic fantasy. Shannon Lynn Harris's *To Taste the Ground* documents daily life at

an organic farm in British Columbia, while Gunzi Holmström's charcoal animation *The Spiritual Life of a Spruce* offers a poetic rumination drawn from the artist's meditation sessions in the forest. In contrast, Marie-France Giraudon's *Entro(SCO)py* features a humanoid creature who boldly explores ice cavities while covered head-to-toe in a bright red bodysuit. Finally, Nelly-Eve Rajotte's *Muu* presents scenes reminiscent of Western cinema, with expansive landscapes that are clearly the product of a human gaze, but where no humans populate the image.

Neither entirely distinct nor purely identical, the two parties in the human-nature dyad remain, for the moment, interdependent, our fates intertwined. Though humans may not survive when our habitat is imperilled, nature will hopefully renew itself as we humans disappear. May this exhibition be received as an offering of faith in that direction.

— Tamar Tembeck

1. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/nature>