

The SuperNatural 2.0



21c

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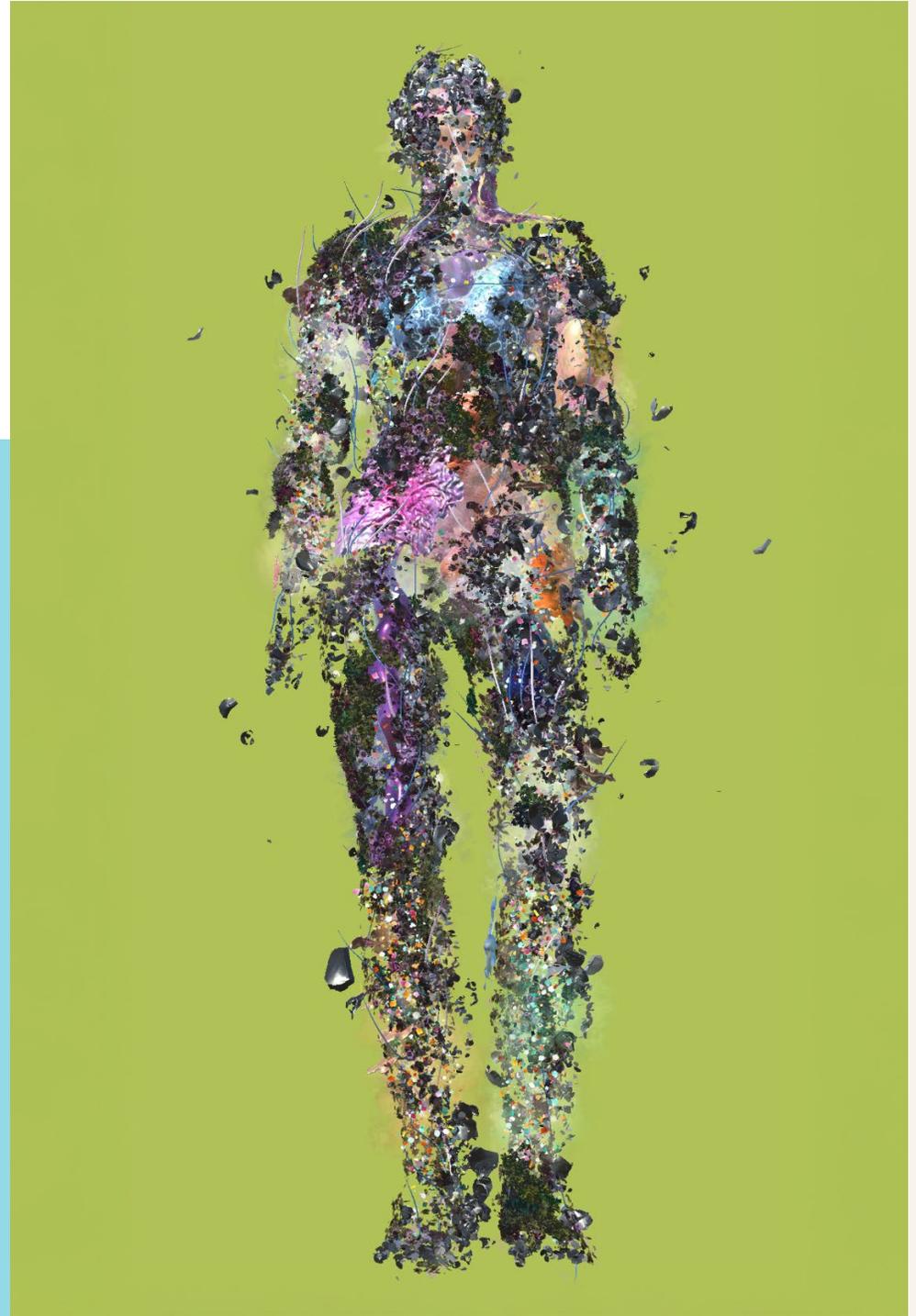
The SuperNatural 2.0

Invoking past and future in a critique of the present, these paintings, photographs, sculptures, videos, and XR artworks document observed, current realities while referencing the aesthetic traditions of the 19th and 20th centuries. Influenced by Romanticism and Surrealism, science and commerce, these visions narrate how the dreams and detritus of the industrial era generated the promise and peril of the digital age and explore the potential for adaptation to the visceral and virtual realities of an increasingly entangled future.

This exhibition is dedicated to the memory of artist Chris Doyle (1959-2025). *"I make work to connect."*

Alice Gray Stites, Chief Curator

Cover: Nancy Baker Cahill
CORPUS, 2022-2026
Augmented reality
Courtesy of the artist



“We humans are not alone in having a sense of community, a sense of fun, a sense of wonder and awe at the beauty of nature. Be prepared to re-evaluate your relationship with the amazing life forms with whom we share the planet.”

— James Bridle, *Ways of Being: Animals, Plants, Machines: The Search for a Planetary Intelligence*

As images of the post-industrial world transform into the bytes and pixels of the digital age, the sublime is becoming the supernatural. Landscape, once the realm of the bucolic and pastoral, now appears alluring and alarming, fantastical, threatening, and threatened, reflecting the earth’s evolution toward an Anthropocene: a planet whose contours and contents will be defined by human activity. This new world may contain hybrid territories, home to hybrid creatures who are the offspring of scientific speculation and artistic fantasy. While hybrids have been a staple of the collective cultural imagination for centuries, images of genetic recombinants populate in particular the art of the turn of 20th century, as do they now. During such periods of significant concurrent economic, technological, and socio-political change, hybrids proliferate, embodying fear and desire, the known and the unknown. They and the territories they may inhabit belong to the uncanny, a place eerily alien and familiar at once. In these still and moving images of land and cityscapes, and in the fabricated figures of *The SuperNatural*, nature meets technoculture, and the new natural is both organic and artificial. Invoking past and future in a critique of the present, these paintings, photographs, sculptures, videos, installations, VR and AR works document both current and future realities while referencing the aesthetic traditions of the 19th and 20th centuries. Influenced by Romanticism and Surrealism, science and commerce, these visions narrate how the dreams and detritus of the industrial era generated the promise and peril of the digital age, and explore adaptation to the visceral and virtual realities of an increasingly entangled future.

“We pack a lot of fear into the landscape right now,” observes Chris Doyle, who moves between analog and digital practices, using both watercolor and software-based animation to explore the evolution of nature and artifice. The collapsing buildings and crumbling infrastructure depicted in Doyle’s *Apocalypse Management* (*telling about being one being living*) exemplify the aftermath of massive destruction akin to the natural and human-induced disasters both witnessed and anticipated today. “The particular cause of the devastation is unclear,” explains the artist, “but whether natural disaster, act of war, or environmental nightmare, the scenario of wreckage portends a state of emergency for which we are reminded to be ready. The figures in the animation are each lost in the moment when disaster ends and the processes of grieving and rebuilding begin.”

Increasingly shaped and perceived through digital code, “the encrypted landscape,” Doyle observes, “is a place that contains multiple realities.” Albano Afonso constructs his enchanted land and light-scapes as enigmatic fields of mystery, the hybrid realm of the daydream: while titles may denote a geographic source, the images seem suspended in time, severed from the realism of specific time and place. The perforated surfaces seen in his series *Paradises* are overlaid on aluminum, creating reflective portals of light that transport the viewer deeper into a layered, shimmering artifice. The mirrors situate the viewer within the image, while simultaneously enacting a profound displacement—creating a supernatural space akin to what philosopher Michel Foucault calls a heterotopia: “I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space... I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives visibility to myself.”

Today's encrypted landscape is also a monitored and surveilled space, as Irvin Labarrios's *Mexican Landscapes* illustrate. The grayscale paintings of arid, rural scenes feature cacti and other typical flora in Mexico, morphing into video surveillance cameras; the works are elaborately framed in gold leaf, and affixed with found objects, including single-use plastics, and other discarded objects. The artist says that "human intervention in the environment modifies the landscape in such a way that it is mostly an *artificial landscape* at the comfort of humanity."

Nature and artifice, science as well as imagination inspire Laura Ball, Sarah Garzoni, Kate Clark, Joshua Haycraft, Anthony Goicolea, and others. Cloning, mutations, and other forms of genetic engineering and technical innovation create new life forms: here a parade of animal species close to extinction whose bodies are morphing together, a chicken "wearing" a rabbit, a gazelle with distinctly human facial features, a tiny bird sporting a mechanized beak at home in a Plexiglas habitat. Critic Michael Rattray observes that taxidermy like Garzoni's *Mascarade 3* signals entry into a surreal frontier: "the object posed frozen as if it were still living may give pause in its stasis. The aesthetic moment thereby enters the unreal universe of altered time, altered space." Within the fantastical realm depicted in Goicolea's large-scale drawings series, *Pathetic Fallacy* (titled after 19th-century critic John Ruskin's term for anthropomorphism in art), tree trunks merge with human organs, potentially the hybrid results of cross-pollination in a world where habitats, bodies, and DNA may be shared. Such hybrids embody Freud's definition of the uncanny in their combination of the truly alien and the deeply familiar. Indeed, these beings are not merely the projections of human emotion or thought onto the non-human: medical science and technology promise a brave new world of cures and improvements, sometimes in service of restoring what has been lost or destroyed.

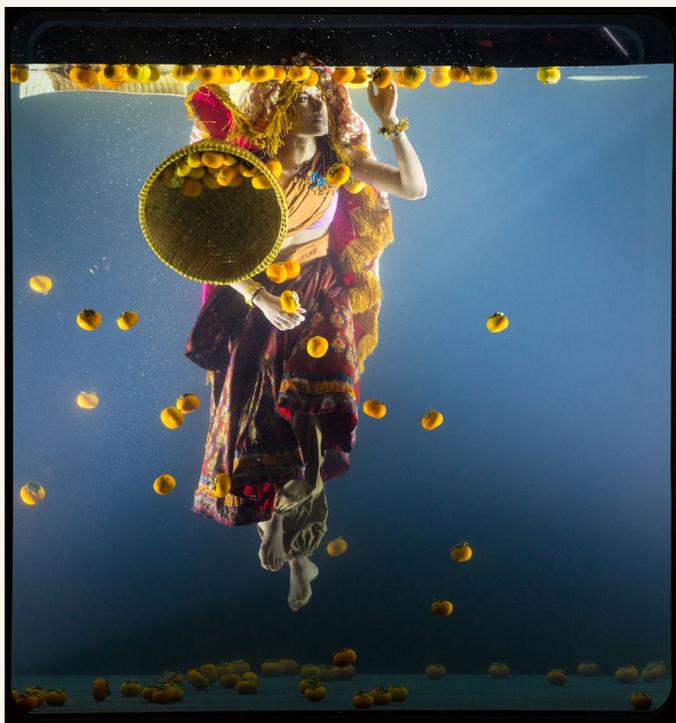
"Contemporary technology is full of promises and myths," says Australian artist Patricia Piccinini, "media culture plays on our hopes and desires for technology with a multitude of pledges and assurances." And yet, neither innovation nor evolution has ever been subject to total control. What if the creations of the technoculture evolve in unexpected ways? Piccinini's *Surrogate for the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat* and *The Listener* are at once enticing and alarming, bearing facial expressions both tender and vulnerable. Curled atop a speaker, the long-haired, doe-eyed *Listener* is presented as if at home—enjoying the entertainment made possible by technology—the potential source of its own existence. As climate change, environmental damage, human behavior, and scientific experimentation actively affect how and which species will evolve, Piccinini's work is an inquiry into our relationship with what the future may beget, asking if we would welcome *The Listener* at home: "I am particularly fascinated by the unexpected consequences, the stuff we don't want but somehow must accommodate. There is no question as to whether there will be undesired outcomes; my interest is in whether we will be able to love them."

Patricia Piccinini
The Listener, 2013 (detail)
Silicone, fiberglass, human hair, speaker cabinet



“Moths drink the tears of sleeping birds. This is the title of a short scientific report from 2006, and the moths are a species on the island of Madagascar named *Hemiceratoides hieroglyphica*...There are two protagonists [in this story], a sleeper and a drinker, a giver and a taker, and what are tears to the former is food to the latter.” This excerpt from Rebecca Solnit’s book *The Faraway Nearby* inspired Monica Stewart’s multi-media installation *Can You Really Feed on Sorrow? After Rebecca Solnit and Hemiceratoides hieroglyphica*, a hanging cascade of paper birds and moths, engaged in symbiotic mutual dependence. Solnit describes her source like a narrative act of anthropomorphism: “The story tells us everything we ever wanted a story to tell. There is difference. There is contact. You can feed on sorrow. Your tears are delicious.” If humans are capable of projecting emotions, desires, and needs onto other species, taking care of other animals, and of the environment, could become synonymous with caring for ourselves, a question that gains increasing urgency in a world shaped by consumption and digitization.

The aesthetics of the digital age fluctuate from dazzling to devastating, charting a cyclical progression beyond what either nature or technology alone may dictate. The combination of beauty and terror that Romantic painters of the 19th century described as sublime has been supplanted by alluring and alarming visions of a planet shaped by human activity. The effects of shifting environmental and economic conditions are documented, imagined, and transformed in works by Lars Jan, Edward Burtynsky, Justin Brice, Alice Pixley Young, Chris Doyle, and others. Consumerism shapes landscapes both real and imagined. While Lars Jan’s photographic images of human figures commingling with an underwater geography appear fantastical, these still images are derived from a public performance he created in which, says the artist, “a totemic aquarium-like sculpture is filled and drained by a custom hydraulic system, capable of flooding the aquarium with twelve tons of water in as little as 45 seconds. Jan titled his multi-media project *Holoscenes*, after the name for our current geologic epoch, the Holocene, which a growing number of experts assert has given way to the Anthropocene. “*Holoscenes*,” explains Jan, “weaves the unraveling story of water — the rising seas, melting glaciers, intensifying floods and droughts — into the patterns of the everyday. The ebb and flow of water and resulting transfiguration of human behavior offers an elemental portrait of our collective myopia, persistence, and, for both better and worse, adaptation.”

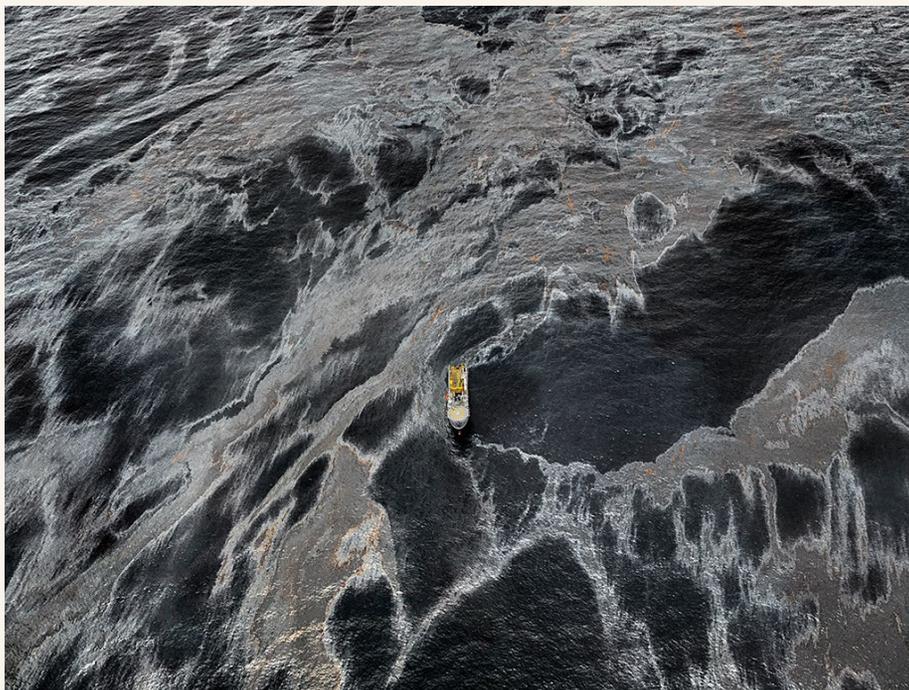


Lars Jan
Persimmons, 2016
 Archival inkjet print

Jan’s prediction that the “visceral and visual performative collision of the human body and water, born of the concern that as global sea levels rise, flooding and drought will become the central issues of the 21st century,” is also a primary subject of Edward Burtynsky’s photography and Justin Brice’s paintings. Shooting from a heightened perspective (often from a helicopter) Burtynsky documents what he defines as “the residual landscape, nature transformed through industry.” *Xiaolangdi Dam #2, Yellow River, Henan Province, China* and *Ölfusá River #1, Iceland*, expose the destruction and danger posed to and by a global water supply subject to increasing levels of pollution and diminishing levels of ice, while *Oil Spill #1, REM Forza, Gulf of Mexico, May 11* offers a seductive and stark reminder of the British Petroleum disaster—an image of both the beauty and the ruin wrought by the harvesting of natural resources. Justin Brice’s *Öbür 1* is derived from photographs of agricultural land in Asia. Captured from thousands of feet above ground, the artist transforms these landscapes into abstracted forms, distilling the imagery to black lines on a white background. By reducing the images to these essential forms, Brice makes visible the impact of commercial development and the resulting irreversible damage to the land.

The plume of smoke that appears in Alice Pixley Young's *Will You Miss Me When I Burn?* critiques both the environmental wreckage caused by oil spills and the limitations of human perception that allow such damage to occur. This image of the Deepwater Horizon explosion off of the U.S. coast is presented within an antique mirror placed against a wall drawing rendered in fading hues of ashy grey. The dark mirror, explains the artist, recalls the "Claude glass (also known as a black mirror), a black tinted mirror that was used by the Hudson River School painters to view landscapes and create idealized, 'picturesque' vistas from which to paint." Like Chris Doyle's re-envisioning of Thomas Cole's Hudson River masterpiece, Young's *Through A Glass Darkly* series transforms the 19th-century sublime into a provocative revelation about current conditions and human behavior—linking the idea of psychological darkness with the historical Romanticist associations of the "Black Mirror."

Edward Burtynsky
Oil Spill #1, REM Forza, Gulf of Mexico, May 11, 2010
Chromogenic print



The nostalgia for the remnants of industrial manufacture mixes fact and fiction, history and desire: "our current environmentalist sensibility, countenancing with horror the 'scars of industry' qua quarries and other ravaged natural sites, seeks to normalize, familiarize, domesticate. A quarry turned into a shopping mall becomes a cleansing of conscience, a recovered 'industrial wasteland.'" So writes Kevin Moore of Elena Dorfman's *Empire Falling*, a series of digitally manipulated photographs of abandoned and repurposed quarries. Layering dozens, sometimes hundreds, of images, Dorfman illuminates our geologic, industrial, and economic history, using time-based art to effectively create a portrait of time. As Moore observes, by producing abstractions of real landscapes that once yielded valued resources, "she is not only capturing in the original images the original conditions of the genesis of capital, she is also representing... subsequent conditions, i.e., the development of finance capital." The title is derived from the Empire Falls quarry, from which stone was harvested to build the Empire State building and other monuments, as well as for roads and crop fertilizer. Dorfman's project delineates the concurrent—and descendent—evolution of capital and its material representation in neoclassical architecture that signaled power and safeguarded hard currency, to the virtual wealth, whose accumulation and exchange, like digital photography, is today manipulated onscreen.

A range of emotions—desire, sadness, awe, and more—animates Dorfman's *Transmutation 2 (Gold Dome)*, a landscape that is at once real and unreal, created from hundreds of images from the artist's travels in Albania, digitally stitched together to create an illusion of a unified scene. It was the artist's fraught familial history with the region that drew her to seek both physical and spiritual connection with nature. "The explosion of *Gold Dome* references a family connection to Orthodox Christianity, once splintered, ultimately resurrected," the artist explains. "As I traversed the region with my camera I was seeking both a spiritual connection and physical evidence of its savage past."

The parallel evolution of economic and ecological conditions in the post-industrial age is the subject of Chris Doyle's *Waste_Generation*, the second in Doyle's series of digital animations inspired by 19th-century painter Thomas Cole's allegorical *Course of Empire*. Vividly rendered trash heaps and dying factories spewing smoke and dollar bills lay bare the legacy of commercial manufacturing, while scrolls of leaves and rapidly sprouting flora and fauna herald nature's resurgence. "The landscape is completely stylized through design," says the artist, "specifically the influence of William Morris and the presentation of the acanthus, the plant on the dollar bill. I am interested not just in natural elements, but the way we interpret them through design and the way we control the natural world through designing it into submission." The lifecycle of paper currency playing on the screen mirrors the artist's "nostalgia for the moment when our industrialized culture [gave] way to information technology," and yet Doyle's digital course of empire is cyclical, not linear, and generative, rather than apocalyptic.

Today technology is increasingly integrated into the environment; computer-generated materials and algorithms are reshaping and redefining how "the natural" world is seen, experienced, and understood, as delineated in works by Jennifer Steinkamp, Quayola, Nancy Baker Cahill, Jakob Kudsk Steeensen, and others. As the window and the computer screen increasingly share a similar function, a visual understanding of landscape may become synonymous with digital imagery. Steinkamp describes her videos as "animations that take full advantage of the computer's ability to create motion and points of view not accessible by any other means.... I set out to investigate illusions that transform the viewer's perception of actual space in a synthesis of the real and the virtual." Titled after members of a Muslim religious order who practice a devotional ritual of whirling, *Dervish 3* presents a digital tree, spinning through the seasons, its leaves growing, changing color, dying and falling, then budding again, in ceaseless motion. This dazzling animation alters the viewer's physical and visual perception of the static space onto which it is projected; the wall seems to have magically opened onto a new yet familiar world.



Chris Doyle
Waste_Generation, 2011 (still)
Digital animation

Quayola's videos, *Jardins d'Été* and *Pleasant Places*, are inspired by the European landscapes once inhabited and painted by Vincent van Gogh and Claude Monet. Using high resolution 3D scanners to capture the countryside of France, Quayola uses custom software and algorithms to reduce the resulting 3D renderings to 2D colors that move and sway, blur and blend, marking an investigation into the ways that nature was observed, studied, and arranged by artists in the 19th century and the ways in which technology today "sees" landscape. *Remains #C-003* and *Pleasant Places #S006.004* are digitally derived images made of hundreds of millions of points whose simulation of the landscape presents an aesthetic somewhere between nature and machine. Quayola explains, "looking at the historic tradition of landscape painting, I am intrigued by how Nature as a subject becomes a point of departure to generate new aesthetics and new ways of seeing..."

Nancy Baker Cahill describes her new short film series, *CARBON*, as a work “that imagines ecological collapse experienced through various perspectives. *CARBON 1* begins with a fictional future landscape featuring elements of earlier sculptural works, layered with footage of live oaks and Spanish moss, petroleum plants, swamps, animal skins (elephant, leopard, snake, and frog) and other ecological features, including AI-generated footage of plastic botanical elements. In the distance are brightly colored fire plumes. We push in on the fires and in a climactic moment, we pass through them and the film cuts to a close-up of my 3-D *WIDOWS* series, one of which is also on view in this exhibition. In the first few seconds of the film, a few lone pixels appear, obscuring a view of what lies behind. As we advance through the landscape, additional ‘pixels’ appear, distracting from and distorting what they hide. Their colors refract and reflect much of what is pictured, contributing to a growing confusion and conflation of perception. After the final cataclysmic moment of fire to ash, viewers experience a quick glimpse into the charred and ashen aftermath, only to have it almost fully occluded in the end with monochromatic pixelated ‘noise,’ a complete erasure of the natural ecosystem in service of algorithmic distraction and data processing.”

Hanging nearby, the graphite paper and green silk ribbons of Baker Cahill’s sculpture, *WIDOW*, is a featured element in *CARBON 1*—the charred, uncanny result of the film’s climactic conflagration. Explains the artist: “*WIDOWS* are made of paper coated in graphite paint, graphite powder, iridescent medium, particulate holographic plastic, and hand-cut silk printed with cinematic stills from an earlier paper-sculpture series called *Slipstream*. Symbolically, they reference ecological collapse, a ‘burned’ botanical or avian structure in the process of being renatured (with silk) or still glowing with digital embers.” The beauty and terror that shaped the 19th-century notion of the sublime have morphed into the fantasies and fears that animate contemporary visions of the entangled landscapes and species of the Anthropocene.

Baker Cahill’s use of technology to connect inner psychological landscapes with exterior eco-systems is also a hallmark of Jakob Kudsk Steensen’s time-based works, *Primal Tourism* and *Aquaphobia*. Both of these high-definition videos began in VR, and both offer immersive explorations of how we shape and share time and space on planets we both occupy and imagine. “We were many things but we never mutually exclusive,” whispers the narrator of *Aquaphobia*, which animates a deeply uncanny journey inspired, says Steensen, “by psychological studies of the treatment of aquaphobia—fear of water—as an entry point to transform perceptions of our relationship to future water levels and climates. You follow a water microbe guiding you through five stages of a breakup story, mixed with references to five steps patients treated for fear of water go through. Ultimately, *Aquaphobia* mixes past and future geological periods, and the work personifies a landscape through a break-up story.” Steensen’s visceral visions propose a truly personal relationship between humanity and nature, one in which earth’s resources are endowed with emotion, thought, and agency. The protagonist of *Aquaphobia* urges us to embrace the interconnection of all life forms, suggesting that a transcendence is possible: “Through the rhythm of my waves, we can learn to move in tandem. Together. Apart. Close your eyes and feel the mass of my droplets slide across body hair, over eyelids. Learn to swim.”

Jakob Kudsk Steensen
Aquaphobia, 2017 (still)
Video



The sentience Steensen accords to his microbial narrator is extended from the screen into the immersive, ephemeral realm of Augmented Reality (AR) in Baker Cahill's *CORPUS*, which the artist says, "imagines a future of blended, embodied entanglement between human, machine, flora, microplastics, and microbiome in the form of a towering AR 'symborg.' Scaled to induce ergonomic awe in viewers, the animated, gender-ambiguous figure presents a series of provocations." Geolocated in 21c's ballroom, "Over the course of approximately 1-2 minutes, the AR figure emerges as a series of constituent metallic, glowing, and organic particulate elements rendered to resemble an ever-shifting blend of pulsing computer code and biological code (DNA). Breathing and gently shifting its weight, *CORPUS* appears transparent in places to suggest a blurring between the digital and the physical and to underscore the fluid (and often competing) nature of realities we have developed for evolutionary fitness. The soundscape is composed of a blend of heartbeats; fetal, human, whale, cosmos (a recording of black holes colliding), and an AI interpolation of them all.

My belief is that future life will involve embracing interconnected embodied (and embrained) sources of cognition- microbial, synthetic, and carbon-based. Our bodies will be increasingly mediated not just by technology and quantum media, but also by new viruses and cellular organisms that thrive in, through and across our bodies. As a holobiont, an 'assemblage of different organisms' behaving as a single entity, *CORPUS* also intends to evoke the idea of a body politic. I also imagine a differently gendered future, a blurring and expansion of gender identities. The blending of so many life-sustaining sources of encoding will generate new architectures and the positioning of a body as process, versus as object. By scaling the artwork to dwarf human-scale viewers, the artwork inverts the assumption of Anthro supremacy and invites a reconsideration of perspective, embodiment, relational engagement, and bioengineering." Adaptation to the visceral and virtual realities of current and future climate conditions may require radical reconsideration of the relationships between humans, plants, animals, and machines, in order to shape a world in which all life-forms, organic and artificial, are endowed with emotion, thought, and agency, and thrive in a deeply entangled, supernatural, interdependence.

Alice Gray Stites
Museum Director, Chief Curator

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ABOUT 21c MUSEUM HOTELS

21c Museum Hotels, an award-winning hospitality company based in Louisville, Kentucky, is pushing the boundaries of both the museum and hotel worlds to create a new kind of travel experience.

The company was founded as a single property by contemporary art collectors and preservationists Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, whose mission was to share innovative contemporary art with the public and participate in the revitalization of downtown Louisville. The couple opened the first 21c in 2006 along downtown's West Main Street, rehabilitating a series of 19th century warehouses to create a union of genuine hospitality, thoughtful design, and culinary creativity—all anchored by a contemporary art museum.

21c is one of the largest contemporary art museums in the U.S., and North America's only collecting museum dedicated solely to art of the 21st century. 21c presents a range of arts programming curated by Museum Director, Chief Curator Alice Gray Stites, including both solo and group exhibitions that reflect the global nature of art today, as well as site-specific, commissioned installations, and a variety of cultural events. The organization collaborates on arts initiatives with artists and organizations worldwide, including Speed Art Museum, North Carolina Museum of Art, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Creative Time, and others. Guests can enjoy 21c Museum Hotels in Louisville, Kentucky; Cincinnati, Ohio; Bentonville, Arkansas; Durham, North Carolina; Lexington, Kentucky; and St. Louis, Missouri.

For more information visit
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ABOUT 21c BENTONVILLE

Located on the northeast corner of the Bentonville town square and a short walk to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, 21c Museum Hotel Bentonville is a 104-room boutique hotel, contemporary art museum, cultural center, and home to The Hive, a contemporary Southern restaurant showcasing the unique culinary identity of Northwest Arkansas. The property boasts over 12,000 square feet of exhibition space, where visitors and locals alike are invited to enjoy rotating, curated exhibitions free of charge, seven days a week.

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