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Overlapping Entities:

Visualizing the Space Between Nature and Culture

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Abstract

In my work I generate forms that occupy the space between our false conceptions of nature and culture. I subvert binaries—both between nature and culture and between women and men—through the physical conflation of microscopic and macroscopic spaces. Nature itself is a cultural concept; the notion that we are separate from nature at all is a fallacy. The body of work discussed uses ideas from Environmental Sociology and my definition of intersectional Ecofeminism to visualize the intersection of these cultural binaries within physical space. The pieces included utilize light responsive technology as a means of mediating our experiences with the environment with the intent of creating a more sustainable future. The work created is a visualization and manifestation of the space where these dichotomies: nature/culture, women/men, and micro/macro understandings of space coalesce and overlap.

My artwork questions the human relationship with the natural world and how we relate to it through the spaces we inhabit. We seek to mediate our interactions with the environment by categorizing and containing it to remove ourselves from it. Nature itself is a cultural concept that we have conceived; the idea that it is a separate notion from ourselves at all is a fallacy.

I subvert conceptual binaries—both between nature and culture and women and men— through the conflation of microscopic and macroscopic spaces when rendered in physical space. Through these scale shifts, I upend the viewer’s expectation of a built environment and the forms within it, making them question their own body in relation to these binaries. In this paper I will discuss several forms in which I do this, using what I understand the popular conception of these binaries to be, the origins of this nature/culture dualism, the wave of Environmental Sociology that seeks to amend this conception, and how my work explores these topics formally. I also examine the false nature and culture binary in the context of Ecofeminist ideology with a more intersectional perspective regarding the ways in which we delineate these categories, not only amongst the nature and culture binary, but also in the gender binary.

In my examination of the space between these dichotomies, I consider architecture as a physical representation of the way we insulate ourselves from the



Figure 1: Zoie Brown, *Polyps*, 2017

environment. In *Polyps* (Figure 1), these biomorphic creatures inhabit an enigmatic pipe juncture, breathing on and off with light each time a viewer passes by, they emphasize the idiosyncratic moments in the spaces we inhabit. By subverting architectural space I alter the viewer's notion of space more generally with regard to how they relate their bodies to the spaces they inhabit. In this body of work I do this by subverting the viewer's conception of microscopic and macroscopic spatial relationships relative to the built space, such as in the pieces *Polyps*, *Between Worlds*, *Corpulent*, and *Biocenosis* (Figures 1, 3, 4 and 6). Light components are used in this work to emphasize specific aspects of the environment and imbue the forms I create with a life of their own, which uses the idea of technology as a means of interaction. Technology can be used as a way to understand and mediate our interactions with our environment in a more sustainable and meaningful way.

Within the context of this paper, culture is defined as the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively, whereas nature is the phenomena of the physical world. The study of the relationship between these two concepts is often referred to as Environmental Sociology. Environmental Sociologist Gary Boden describes how this field seeks to re-conceptualize the nature/culture relationship (Bowden 49). In my artwork I formally convey culture through physical representations of tissue samples from human organs, human body parts, and architectural spaces. These forms are then amalgamated in my formal exploration of what we commonly refer to as nature, including plant tissues, bacterial growth patterns, caves, mountains, and coral reefs. Through this conflation I explore why we have come

to define these two concepts in this way. In doing so the pieces I create embody neither a conception of nature nor a conception of culture individually.

Lighting plays a substantial role in how I engage the viewer and make them notice how my work has

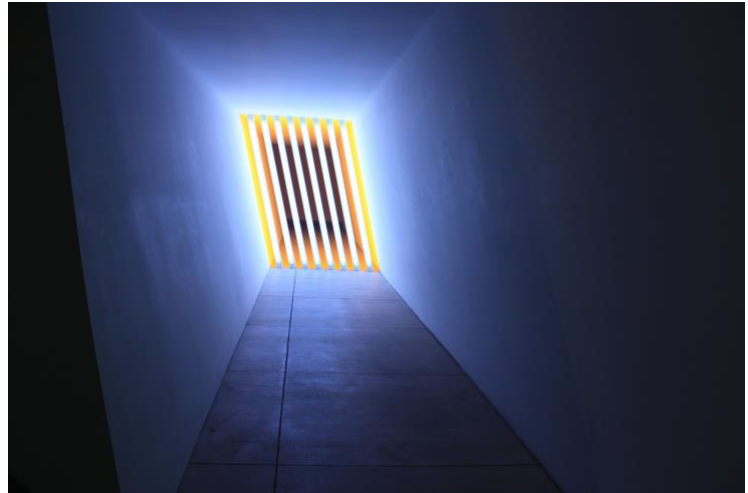


Figure 2: Dan Flavin, *Untitled (Marfa Project)* 1996

altered the existing environment. Dan Flavin similarly alters the viewer's perspective through the manipulation of light. Specifically, in Dan Flavin's *Untitled (Marfa Project)* (Figure 2), he has skewed the built space of the exiting hallways within old army barracks in Marfa, Texas and accentuated these spatial shifts through the manipulation of light as a sculptural material (Chinati Foundation). In *Between Realities* (Figure 3), I have done the same thing but to a different effect. The interior of the altered wall contains a biomorphic, alien, and seemingly microscopic atmosphere, as if looking into

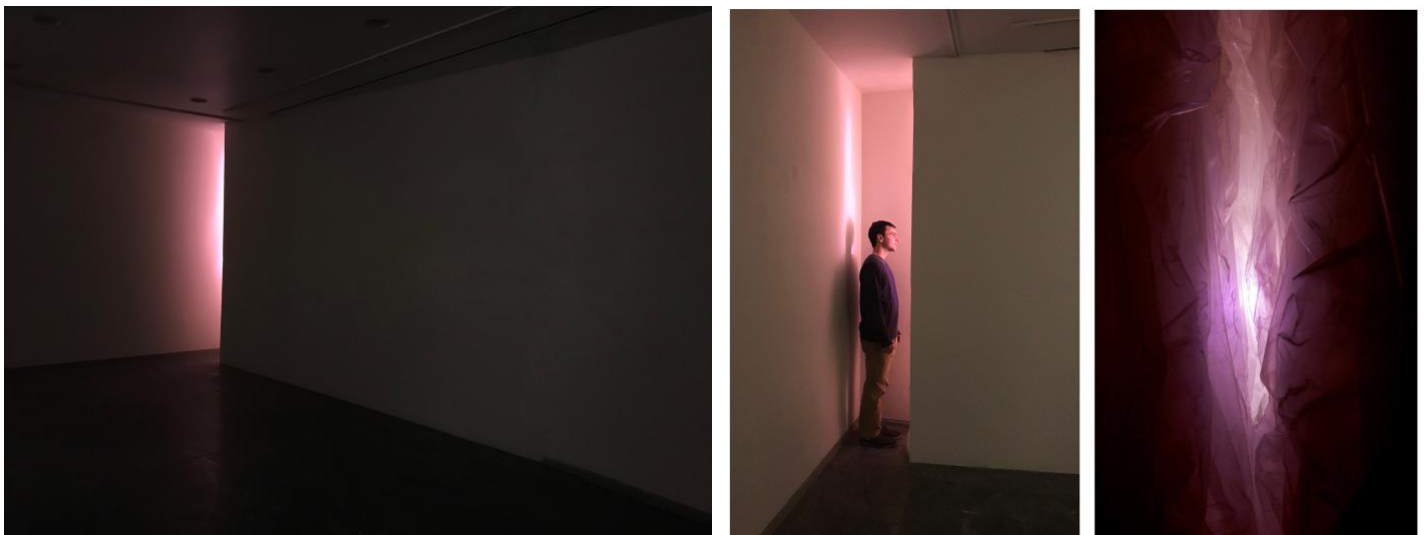


Figure 3, Zoie Brown, *Between Realities*, 2017 (Left: full installation view, Center: side view of person looking between the walls, Right: View seen when looking between the walls.)

a tissue sample or an opening to another realm beyond the one that existed in the built space previously. The interior space created in this piece is womb-like and finite, but it also somehow seems endless in its depth. Flavin's hallways play on our perception of light in a calculated and scientific way, whereas my work is visceral and bodily in its examination of space.

The competing nature/culture paradigm that my work mediates between became a prominent human consideration during the Industrial Revolution and has only intensified since. Environmentalism is always at odds with our neoliberal western economy, which contributes to the contentious binary between humans and nature. Aldo Leopold was one of the first to specifically critique this duality by demanding that we reevaluate our relationship to nature. In a section of the *Sand County Almanac* (1949) entitled, "The Land Ethic," he asserted that all ethics relies on "the premise that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts" (203). Leopold explained that "the land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (204). By defining ethics as a larger commitment to every entity in the world, including non-human creatures, Leopold set up the ideas that would lead to modern Environmental Sociology, which are the concepts I want to imbue viewers with through my work.

Environmental Sociologist Gary Bowden describes how "society and nature are inextricably intertwined in a complex, evolving socio-natural assemblage" (64). His viewpoint is a normative evaluation of the relationship between nature and culture, not necessarily an assessment of what people currently view that relationship to be. My work seeks to shift the common perception closer to these concepts that Environmental

Sociologists are currently exploring. Through my work I find a middle ground between this binary—I illustrate the creatures that exist in the interstitial spaces between our definition of nature and culture.

In this body of work I connect the viewer to the forms I create by formally invoking parts of the human body with the intention of causing a visceral reaction that will link the work to the viewer's own body. Sex organs hold particular power to draw attention to the vulnerable areas of our bodies and make us uncomfortable. They are something we deal with daily, but often chose to ignore. Through the creation and subsequent abstraction of these human and plant organs, I seek to complicate both the female/male and the nature/culture dichotomy. The references to the body conflate the sexes just as the references to organic growth merge the environment with the human space. One work that does this in particular is *Corpulent*, a wax creature lit internally that responds to varying noise levels with corresponding light levels (Figure 4). The creature could formally reference the phallus, a bubble-tip coral, or a mushroom in a forest. I have created a form that combines these visually to make the viewer question the origin of these forms and why we differentiate them to begin with.



Figure 4: Zoie Brown, *Corpulent*, 2017

Ecofeminism is a school of thought that reflects this thinking about the relationship between the binary systems of both nature and culture as well as women and men. In *Earth Muse*, Carol Bigwood writes that we should be “playing in the gap between nature and culture,” and she critiques phallogentric art and culture and questions how this has affected human relationships with what we consider to be the natural world (200). Ecofeminism also centers around the concept of the earth mother Gaia, which links ideas of an oppressive patriarchal force to the repression of women and the earth. I disagree with Bigwood in her claim that the relationship between humans and nature is a direct analogy to the relationship between men and women. That analogy of the nature/culture binary with female/male counterparts essentializes gender in a way that is not productive to the discussion of our obligation to amend our conceptions of these social constructs. I consider these relationships to be much more complicated and intersectional. There are fluid gender identities, just as there are overlapping notions of what is human and what is natural. There is not an equivalent relationship between males and neoliberal industrialism, just as there is not one between females and unaltered ecosystems. These false dualities are simply an attempt to organize the chaos we exist in. My art conflates all of these conceptions to draw attention to the absurdity of these dichotomies.

In my exploration of the subversion of the built environment, architecture can be described as a means of covering or insulating the cultural space from the natural one. My artwork questions this relationship by examining the way the human body exists in the built space. I seek to question the human perception of our bodies within the built space and to ask why we do not consider it a natural space. In *The Poetics of Space*,

Bachelard describes how spaces are the physical manifestations of our minds. They are sanctuaries for our interior states. My work questions why we conceptually separate what we create from other aspects of this world. We position ourselves as either at odds with nature or as keepers of it. Neither perspective is sustainable. We are very much at the mercy of our environment, but we can choose to be more functionally integrated, starting with the spaces we create. In my work I alter our societal way of thinking by altering what the viewer would expect from a given built environment. Reshaping and conflating the built space with what is perceived as the natural space changes how the viewer understands these definitions of her environment.

Within the existing architecture, I also constantly shift the dynamic between the viewer's understanding of microscopic and macroscopic space within their architectural surroundings, thereby bringing the body into an alternate spatial scale. In doing so, viewers are left to reevaluate their own size in relation to the built environment and the forms around them. Yayoi Kusama uses ideas similar to this in her series of *Infinity Rooms* (Figure 5), where

she creates a seemingly infinite space in a small intimate room to alter the viewer's sense of space and reality. In *Biocenosis* (Figure 6), I similarly seek to encapsulate the viewer in a shifted environment,



Figure 5: Yayoi Kusama, *Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity*, 2009

but instead of being seemingly infinite, mine is encapsulating and womblike. The viewer is encapsulated in the space I created in a way that is both uncomfortable and comforting.

Moreover, I use light as a metaphor for life within the forms I create. When the pieces are lit internally, they take on a life of their own. My forms are given life by communicating: they react to the viewer's movements and sounds with varying internal light levels. In *Biocenosis* I created an ecosystem where the creatures respond to each other as well as the viewer (Figure 6). The closer the viewer is to the sculpted forms in the room, the dimmer the forms become—but once the viewer approaches they dim and others brighten—as if to shrink back and ask for help. These

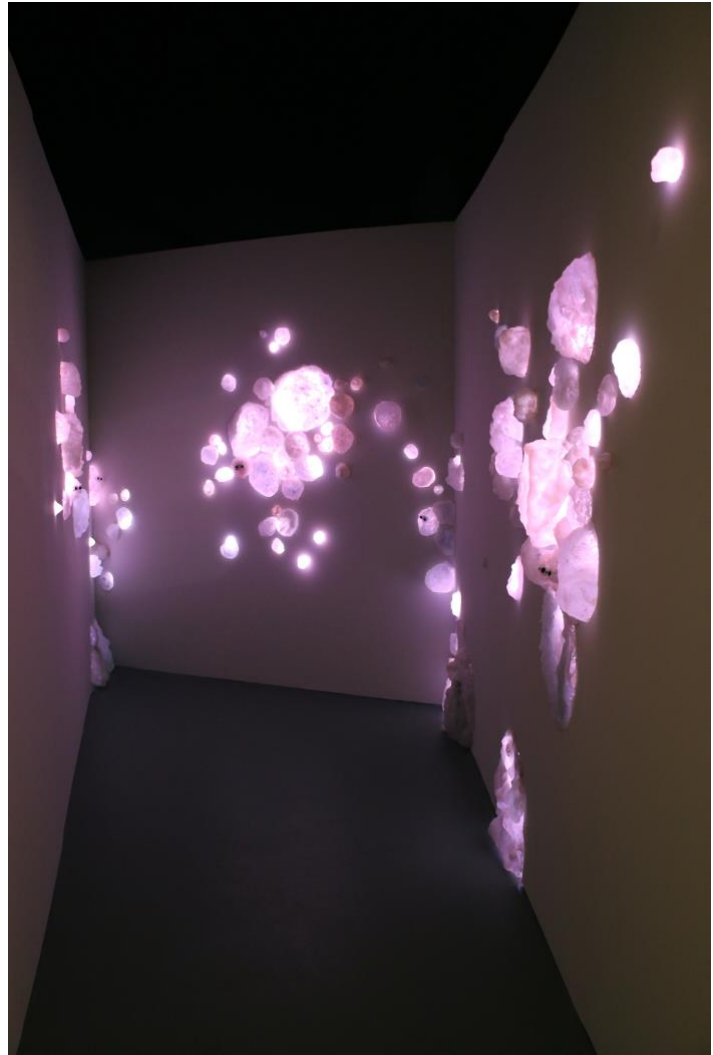


Figure 6: Zoie Brown, *Biocenosis*, 2018
Top: Full room installation view.
Bottom: Detail of right wall.

creatures exist in an interconnected system, like a neural net in the brain or a clump of tree roots under the forest floor. Their communication through light bridges the space between the forms and the viewers, coexisting in a way similar to interlinked species within an ecosystem.

In *Biocenosis* the forms are an integral part of the built environment, inhabiting it as their home (Figure 6). They are fully integrated into the built structure, acting as a metaphor for the overlapping space between nature and culture that we should seek to occupy. The forms are both phallic and yonic, calling attention to the viewer's own body and connecting it to their physical presence. I want the viewer to relate to these beings in their familiarity, and at the same time recognize their more plant-based physical qualities. I use a soft pink light to illuminate them because pink relates to our own internal systems; it's visceral and intestinal, and it calls to mind our bodies in relation to the ones that I have sculpted. In conflating both the human and plant body, I call attention to their similarities and subvert the false dichotomies we have created.

In this body of work light acts as a symbol of life, therefore using technology as a means of mediating our relationship with these forms. Technology acts as a barrier between culture and the environment but recently it has become a means of accessing and understanding our relationship with the environment more deeply. We now seek a means to bridge the gap between cities and landscape through sophisticated urban design so that we can create a more symbiotic relationship with our environment. I employ technology to connect these polyp-like creatures to the built environment they exist in. All western viewers are accustomed to the ephemera of technology that's present in our daily lives, which is usually a means of defining our space as separate

from the natural space. I utilize lighting technology as a metaphor for life because through technology we can create a better, overlapping understanding of our relationship with nature as a species. Light becomes a symbol of life and energy. It is a means of communicating using materials made by people but derived from the earth.

People should reconsider the way they contextualize themselves in the places they inhabit. After viewing my work, people will have a new conception of their surroundings and their body within them. I examine the overlapping relationship of nature and culture through the theories involved in Ecological Sociology, intersectional Ecofeminism, and formally through the conflation of the human and plant body, and the alteration and subsequent subversion of the built space through micro and macroscopic scale shifts. The amalgamation of human and natural spheres creates a new reality that reveals something about the way we define our own. The work I create invades the places we inhabit, occupying the spaces we think we understand.

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