

Washington University in St. Louis

## Washington University Open Scholarship

---

Graduate School of Art Theses

Graduate School of Art

---

Summer 5-7-2013

### Artificial Landscapes: Reflecting Interior Worlds

Vivian Zapata  
vzapata23@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: [https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/samfox\\_art\\_etds](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/samfox_art_etds)



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Zapata, Vivian, "Artificial Landscapes: Reflecting Interior Worlds" (2013). *Graduate School of Art Theses*. ETD 115. <https://doi.org/10.7936/8w9g-4f17>.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate School of Art Theses by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact [digital@wumail.wustl.edu](mailto:digital@wumail.wustl.edu).

Washington University in St. Louis  
Graduate School of Art

# **Artificial Landscapes: Reflecting Interior Worlds**

By: Vivian Zapata

A thesis presented to the  
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts  
of Washington University in St. Louis  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Committee:  
Patricia Olynyk  
Cheryl Wassenaar  
Buzz Spector  
Monika Weiss

May 2013

## ABSTRACT

In this study I examine ideas of nature, human nature, and artificial nature that are relevant to my work. I explain that the natural realm is a physical presence in the world and that it is also a cultural construct. My work is concerned with metaphorical representations of nature and I contextualize my artwork within the work of modern and contemporary artists who create artificial representations of nature that reference landscapes. I relate that I am disturbed by our current culture's inharmonious relationship with the natural realm and explain how my work opposes our cultural anthropocentrism and the collective assumption that the natural realm is mostly valuable because of its material worth.

The natural realm, to me, is essential to humans' physical and emotional well-being because the phenomena of our sensorial environments inspires our metaphors, symbols and analogies that allow us to communicate more effectively. My work allies itself with the philosophy of Deep Ecology that teaches that all living beings on Earth are valuable, interdependent, and that a respectful co-existence with these beings enriches our own experiences.

In later sections I explain how artificial nature reflects human nature: more specifically, our concerns, thoughts, and emotions. Romanticism and Deep Ecology teach us that the natural realm can enhance our self-understanding. I compare and contrast my artwork to other contemporary artists' artificial representations of nature that reflect Romanticist or Deep Ecology leanings.

I support philosophers of nature who believe that humanity's distance from the natural realm is dangerous. My work employs several strategies to help us see nature in a light of reverence and respect. I anthropomorphize nature in my work to reveal individualized concerns

regarding our current cultural conditions. My anthropomorphization recognizes the interconnectedness between humans and the natural realm, our spiritual and physical similarities, and works against our cultural anthropocentrism that allows us to dominate the natural realm. In addition to discussing my art within the meta-topic of artificial nature, I also discuss my artistic strategies that allude to Romanticism, the Kitsch Aesthetic, the Grotesque Body, and the Carnavalesque.

## Table of Contents

Introduction: What is Nature?.....	5
What is Human Nature?.....	6
Artificial Nature, a Reflection of Human Nature.....	7
Romanticism and Contemporary Art: A Closer Look at Artificial Landscapes.....	8
Artificial Nature: The Kitsch Experience.....	18
Artificial Nature and Grotesque Bodies.....	24
Artificial Landscapes and the Carnavalesque.....	30
Conclusion.....	34

Introduction: What is Nature?

Vivian Zapata

Rolling rivers, lush forests, brightly colored flowers, chirping birds, the sun glistening through a dense canopy, the slopes of a distant hill, the cool ambient colors after heavy snowfall. What is nature? The natural realm is a physical presence in the world but it is also a cultural construct. Whenever nature is represented through language or art it becomes metaphorical or symbolic. My work is concerned with these metaphorical representations of nature. My *oeuvre* can be contextualized within the work of modern and contemporary artists who create artificial representations of nature that reference landscapes.

It is evident in the way our culture relates to nature that it has a secondary status to human culture. We value nature mostly because of its material worth which provides the means of our subsistence and comfort. I am conscious and disturbed by humanity's anthropocentrism. Nature, in the context of my *oeuvre*, is not a passive, mechanistic entity to be controlled and manipulated at will. I endow nature, the animal and plant realm, with a bodily presence that is fantastic, spectacular, sentient, and reactive. It is a body that is undeniably analogous to our own. I subscribe to the Deep Ecology idea that all life on Earth is a web of interconnections and that we share special, and more egalitarian, value for this reason. We are all a part of nature, and the animal and plant realm possesses spiritual as well as material qualities that are essential to humans.

It is worth elaborating that our current societal views concerning nature are predicated on the scientific legacy of the Age of the Enlightenment during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. There are two dominant currents of philosophy concerning nature in western culture and they both stem from the Enlightenment. In the book, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, professor Richard Tarnas

differentiates between “two temperaments or general approaches to human existence characteristic of the Western mind.”<sup>1</sup> He refers to the differences between the “spirit of enlightenment” and “the romantic vision.”<sup>2</sup> In one view, the scientific perspective, nature is esteemed for what it contributes to human knowledge and consequently human wellbeing. Nature, in this view is somewhat dead, machine-like, and indifferent to human exploitation. In the romantic view, nature is more spiritually charged and has more deeply seeded connections to humanity. Tarnas elaborates, “whereas for the Enlightenment-scientific mind, nature was an object for observation and experiment, theoretical explanation and technological manipulation, for the Romantic, by contrast, nature was a live vessel and spirit, a translucent source of mystery and revelation.”<sup>3</sup>

As a contemporary romanticist, I identify with nature and also recognize that our culture is becoming increasingly distanced from it. In the act of imagining narrative scenarios in which nature has agency, I work to project more individualized concerns and emotions concerning our present cultural conditions. Art has the capacity to ascribe metaphorical meaning to nature that can speak to the anthropocentrism of humans. The environmental crisis of our time requires us to think about the natural realm with renewed respect and wonder. Art can help us accomplish this task. My work employs several strategies to help see nature in this light of reverence. In addition to discussing my art within the meta-topic of artificial nature my work also alludes to such themes as the Romanticism, the Kitsch Aesthetic, the Grotesque Body, and the Carnavalesque.

### What is Human Nature?

Human nature, to me, is anything and everything that relates to human concerns, thoughts, and emotions. The answer is broad because the concept is broad. Depending on the

subject or subjects, our answer might vary. If one looks specifically at the creation of concentration camps, for example, one could argue that human nature is evil. If one listens to Handel's *Hallelujah* chorus from the *Messiah*, one could say that human nature is glorious and beautiful. There are no simple conclusions about human nature because it is complex and is dependent upon multiple factors whether they are social, political or personal. Art is a human production and therefore reflects human nature.

### Artificial Nature, A Reflection of Human Nature

Artificial nature or, more specifically fake representations of actual organic forms are certainly human constructs and reflect something about human nature. If the natural realm is an actual physical presence in the world, why do humans feel compelled to recreate its forms through artificial means? In the act of representing nature, human metaphorical and personalized concerns are revealed. Viewers who immerse themselves in such artificial landscapes can come closer to knowing the artist's emotions and concerns.

Before artists symbolize, they must have knowledge of the natural realm as it exists. It is only through some knowledge of our natural environment that we can re-interpret it metaphorically. The understanding of the natural realm is critical because it aids with human communication. Art Historian Ernst Gombrich explains nature's relevance in his lecture, *Nature and Art as Needs of the Mind*. In the lecture, originally given at the University of Liverpool in 1981, he argues that language is a foremost need of the human mind. He says that while human experience is infinite, language is finite, so it is absolutely necessary to employ nature and art in language as they offer "the richest sources of metaphor."<sup>4</sup> As an example, he cites the metaphor, "the sun is smiling" and he says the expression could "let us know that the sun and smiles could



affect us in similar ways.”<sup>5</sup> What is relevant here is Gombrich’s statement that “without forming such compounds linking our sensory experience with our emotional life we could not communicate our feelings to others and to ourselves.”<sup>6</sup> Artificial and metaphorical constructions of nature are created for the purposes of communicating an interior life. Philosophies such as Romanticism and Deep Ecology teach us that Nature can enhance our self-understanding but our culture rarely promulgates this truth.

### Romanticism and Contemporary Art: A Closer Look at Artificial Landscapes.

Our present age is complex. Our era can be defined by capitalism, consumer culture, large industry, environmental conflict, poverty, and social unrest. Curators have organized exhibitions of contemporary art reflecting the pessimism or darker moods of our age. One such traveling exhibition from 2008-09 was *Damaged Romanticism: A Mirror of Modern Emotion*. In the catalog’s introduction, curator Terrie Sultan, director of the Parrish Art Museum, explains that the exhibition’s artists reveal their disappointment through their work. Sultan explains, “according to the concept of ‘Damaged Romanticism,’ the often phantasmagorical exoticism of late 18<sup>th</sup> century romanticism crashes headlong into the present, where idylls as well as confrontations are modified by the clarity of pragmatic realism.”<sup>7</sup> In these artworks, human thought comes to terms with realities that can be difficult to process. Sultan describes the themes of the exhibition, “the works of damaged romantics bear witness to themes common among enduring cultures—the silence of irrecoverable loss, the sadness of mourning, the incomprehensibility of extreme trauma, and the psychological complexity born of an awareness of fate’s capricious finality.”<sup>8</sup>

An idiosyncratic quality of romantics is the wedding of personal psychology to material. My artificial landscapes are visually exuberant, but beneath the veneer of beauty I reveal concerns with death, as it pertains not merely to humans but to the natural realm as well. Beginning with my sculpture, *The Fairest of Them All* (Figure 1), I show a preoccupation with entropy, or more specifically the processes of growth and decay. When I was conceptualizing this sculpture, I was thinking about the sadness of realizing that all beauty and all life is ephemeral. At the time, I was paying close attention to some rose bushes outside my apartment. In the midst of all this vibrant red and potent beauty, one could see clusters of dark death and decay. These fading flowers were beautiful in their way, but I found the contrast between life and death impactful. I had a psychic connection to what I was observing, perhaps because the site physically manifested the idea that life and all we love in it, is only temporary.

In the initial stages of this project I wanted butterflies to symbolize the ephemerality of life. The butterflies are incorporated throughout the sculpture (Figure 1 through 3). Butterflies are fragile creatures with very brief life cycles. Later during the creative process, I incorporated artificial flowers. The difference in the accumulation of flowers on the sculpture, from top to bottom, and also the difference in the flowers' colors, from bright and multicolored ones to dark ones, suggests my preoccupation with life and death transitions (Figures 1 through 3). The life and death cycle is captured in a single prop that could belong to a bigger room. When looking at the sculpture, one could imagine the narrative from which it is extracted. Perhaps in the story, a character walks into a normal room but suddenly an invisible force takes over the human-scaled mirror, making it sprout a frame of wild and artificial flowers. The choice to obscure much of the mirror's reflective surface with an opaque orange tint denies viewers the opportunity to see their reflections. This means that, in the presence of my sculpture, we are invited to look outside

ourselves in relation to nature's processes and life cycles. The structure has a funereal presence because of its shape and scale. Nature is anthropomorphized in this project because it has a body that parallels our own. The message of the sculpture is that nature reflects us, or more specifically, our psychologies. As mentioned, it is a Romanticist idea that looking upon nature helps us achieve self-understanding. This sculpture emphasizes a Deep Ecology idea. In the essay, "*Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World*" contained in the book *The Deep Ecology Movement*, philosophical founder Arne Naess, states one principle of this philosophical movement, the concept of the ecological self that requires humans to think of themselves as being "...in, of and for Nature..."<sup>9</sup>

My title, *The Fairest of Them All*, requires an explanation. In the Grimm's fairytale, *Snow White*, a witch is obsessed about being the most beautiful person in the kingdom. She asks her magic mirror on multiple occasions, "mirror, mirror on the wall who is the fairest of them all?" The queen is enraged when the mirror responds that her own stepdaughter is the most beautiful within the land. This is so distressing to the queen that she sends one of her messengers to kill Snow White. The messenger is unable to do this and instead brings back a pig's heart as "proof" of the slaying. In a way, we can think of the queen as a symbolic representation of our own culture. She is infatuated with her own appearance similar to our societal anthropocentrism, unable to feel or sympathize with the other life forms of the natural realm that are really extensions of our own family. In my work it is neither the queen nor Snow White who is the fairest, but rather the natural realm.

When Snow White is warned never to come back to the kingdom because she will be killed, she runs off into the woods in despair. In many depictions of the story, both in film and the animated cartoon Disney version, nature initially takes on a very scary presence. Trees turn

into figures whose branch-arms reach out to grasp her. These woods are really just a projection of Snow White's state of mind. She feels scared, alone, and in danger. In the latest film version, *Snow White and the Huntsman*, from 2012, we see a reciprocal exchange take place between Snow White and a giant forest troll whose skin is textured like a tree trunk. The troll, disturbed in its sleep by Snow White and a messenger, sets out to kill them both. Snow White confronts and screams at the creature causing him to turn away calmly. In the act of communicating with this troll, she recognizes a being that she must deal with in order to remain safe. Nature, then, is not an enemy that must be destroyed at all cost. In most versions of the film, nature is kinder to her after she meets and befriends the dwarfs because she feels at ease in her new home. This story is very much about the differences between inner and outer beauty. Although the queen is beautiful on the outside, her conceit makes her pitifully despicable. Snow White is more beautiful because her inner character is more beautiful. This is also demonstrated in the way she relates to animals. When Snow White is put under the queen's spell of eternal sleep, the animals think she is dead and they weep.

The strategy to represent darker ideas through visually pleasing representations is a tactic employed by many contemporary artists. Even though my sculpture *The Fairest of Them All* (Figures 1 through 3) is partially about death and certainly about understanding ourselves in relation to nature, there is nothing scary about the sculpture upon first glance. Contrarily, viewers might be attracted to the abundance of life and color that reflects otherworldly splendor. Upon closer inspection, however, we see that this artificial nature has gone awry. It is a grotesque nature, spilling its guts and dying, but expressed in a palette of acidic oranges, saccharine pinks, and bonbon flesh. We get visual overload, like eating too much candy at once.

Angelo Filomeno is another contemporary artist who is interested in representing nature's

processes through artificial representations. In his work, nature's sometimes-disgusting processes including birthing, urination, and defecation, are presented through beautiful and eye-catching materials. In discussing Filomeno's work in the catalog *Damaged Romanticism*, curator Claudia Shmuckli claims that "Filomeno's allegorical paintings and sculptures made of shimmering fabric embroidered with metallic thread, cascading crystals, and precious metals seduce us with their material riches into contemplating the harsher realities of our existence"<sup>10</sup> She elaborates that Filomeno's flora and fauna are really symbols of temporality. His contemporary vanitas attract viewers through materiality but death underlies it all.

In Filomeno's embroidered painting, *King and Queen* (Figure 4), for example, two human skulls, with their spinal chords still attached, float in space. Fanciful light pink clouds ending in curlicues surround the spines. The curlicues are further surrounded by tinier embellishments including stars and spirals that intermix with stylized floral motifs. Dragonflies feed off the pink clouds that stand in for human bodies. One panel of the diptych is punctured. Black pearls spill out from this hole that can be read as a feminized bodily opening. A yellow butterfly emerges from this birthing place. In the other figure, a little bird spits forth a peacock feather. The location of the spitting bird mirrors the feminized opening, suggesting it is the male bodily counterpart. The skulls sprout bright plants from their heads. One of the heads sprouts orange lilies. The work is bilaterally symmetrical. The skulls mirror each other. All of this foreground action is superimposed on a highly artificial purple background.

What I have in common with Filomeno is his love of artifice, embellishment, and saturated colors. Shmuckli reveals that Filomeno worked at a costume shop before dedicating himself more to his artistic vocation. She states that because of this background in "fashion and performance" it is not surprising that his works are "luxurious, rarified and highly theatrical..."<sup>11</sup>

His artificial representations of nature are rendered on a two-dimensional surface. My projects are three-dimensional. His project is embroidered and my project employs multi-media including foam, paint, wood, and artificial flowers. The mirroring in his project is between a pair of differently gendered human-nature hybrids. The mirroring in my project is between a human viewer and a magical hybrid mirror. His artwork functions like a painting, and my sculpture could be a prop within a theatrical or movie set. In both of our works we can see references to both human and botanical motifs. In my project, these human and natural forms are more amalgamated. The body is opened in both of our works. In his work the opening is a small detail but in mine it is a central feature. Our representations of artificial nature are whimsical, stylized, colorful, and also relate to the carnivalesque grotesque body that I will discuss later.

My work, *Expulsion II* fits within the theme of broken romanticism (Figure 6). In my sculpture, I reference the story of *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, from 1427, as represented in Massacio's Renaissance fresco. (Figure 5). I retell this Judeo-Christian and anthropocentric narrative from nature's perspective. In the retelling, I imagine a dystopian future in which nature slowly emerges from a magical cave to die. In the fresco, Adam and Eve slowly emerge from a narrow architectural opening representing a portal that opens to the utopian garden we do not see. The figures' bodily gestures demonstrate an overwhelming sense of humiliation and sadness after having fallen from grace. They have tasted the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and they then suffer the consequences of divine punishment. The story is a devastating one. Two figures who once knew only bliss have their rose-colored world stripped from them. They are thrown into an uncertain future and fear their doom.

What are the Expulsion references that make up the body of my sculpture? To begin, my formal composition does not merely reference a cave; it also references a yoni. The yoni is the Sanskrit word for vulva and it is a triangular birthing symbol. The vulva is both a bodily place and an earthly place. An explanation is included in the *Book of Symbols, Reflections on Archetypal Images*. In referring to the vulva, Native-American authors Frank and Oswald White Bear Fredericks Waters state, “Through this deep orifice emerge menses, birth waters, birth blood and newborns. Similarly, water emerges through clefts in stone, plants sprout from seeds opening through earth and souls and spirits enter this world from the other side; souls reenter the hidden world in spirit journeys and at death.”<sup>12</sup> In retrospect, it is surprising to see how much the shape of my sculpture resembles the pictorial depiction of a female reproductive system even though my original references were Victorian decorative motifs (Figure 7). Why a cave and why a yoni? Caves as symbols represent passageways between the realm of the living and the dead. One also learns in the aforementioned book that womb-like caves were central features in the creation myths of many cultures. Additionally, in western literature, a cave marked the entrance to hell. The cave then, also references a place of death as well as life. It is a portal marking the transition between worlds. The yoni stands clearly as a symbol representing the origin of life. It is a birthing place and its outpouring could also symbolize a menstrual flow. Life, unable to exist in my projected future, spills out in a symbolic stream of death. I do not take an eco-feminist stance and say that nature is feminized when I borrow these cultural and literary symbols. My intent is to draw the analogy that the death of the natural realm could be compared to a final bodily and earthly expulsion, like a final last breath before dying forever. The realm existing beyond the cave portal is Earth. The space the viewer stands in is an imaginary and bizarre realm

whose strangeness comes from the ambiguous body of the grotto and its fanciful materials. It is an anthropomorphic cave that looks a bit threatening because of its animation.

I was conscientious in using color in my project. The darkness emerging from the cave is black. Black in western culture is the color of death, and also symbolically the color of malignancy and evil as it is devoid of divine light. The figures in Masaccio's painting cry as they exit Eden. How could I represent nature's suffering after its banishment? We cannot see the flowers actually moving in my giant cave ornament, but we can imagine their whimpering and slow drift. The flowers' colors and gestures help us imagine the action within the narrative. Blues and purples are the colors of bruises, sadness, and pain. If one studies my flowers closely, one will find that the flowers look wet and they leak the color of their sadness onto the black rock-like texture of the grotto. I bathed the flowers in thick resin. The flowers are literally weighed down by the resin but also metaphorically by their sadness (Figures 9 and 10). Occasionally in this mass of dark purples and blues, the viewer will stumble across a lurid red. These red roses bleed, like freshly extracted organs (Figure 11). I recognize that I anthropomorphize nature in my works. Scientists avoid and criticize the anthropomorphization of nature. In the act of projecting human qualities on non-human living entities then one distorts the truth of these beings' lived experiences. My wish is not to devalue their sacred lives. Rather, anthropomorphizing nature in my work is an artistic strategy employed to reveal my own concerns about the fate of the planet.

Petah Coyne is a prime example of neo-romanticist artist. Her artwork is abstract and sculptural but deals with symbolic expressions of death, life, and resurrection. Her work alludes to landscapes and bodies at once. A sense of environment is created when multiple sculptures are set up in a single installation space. Many of Coyne's works, especially her early ones, are less



narrative than mine but my work shares a kinship with Coyne's materials and her thematic interests. Coyne is included in the catalog *Damaged Romanticism*. Terri Sultan states, "She has challenged aesthetic complacency by creating startlingly beautiful works of art that delve deep into the concepts of life and death, growth and decay, order and chaos."<sup>13</sup> I would like to focus on an earlier Coyne sculpture, *Untitled # 1103 (Daphne)* from 2002-03. Earlier sculptures from 2002-03, such as this, inspired her later work of *The Inferno* and *The Unforgiven* series.

Coyne's sculpture, *Untitled # 1103 (Daphne)*, was originally included in her survey exhibition, *Above and Beneath the Skin* at the Sculpture Center in New York. In this anthropomorphized sculpture, Coyne re-interprets the Greek mythological story of Daphne and Apollo (Figure 12). In the story Daphne begs her father to help her escape from Apollo who is madly in love with her. Both Apollo and Daphne are under Cupid's spell. In the Daphne's case, Cupid has caused her to hate Apollo. The father agrees to her wishes and turns her into a laurel tree. Coyne's interpretation of *Daphne* is dark and startling, she is a metamorphic creature coming from a nightmarish landscape. *Daphne* is a hybrid figure. Viewers can see the abstract form of a woman wearing a long gown that trails behind her. The head of this figure is a dark mass of twisted and bent branches that mix with black and red flowers. Nature normally conjures up images of beauty and life in the minds of humans but Coyne's *Daphne* seems to come from the netherworld. Artificial flowers that are consistent in scale are tightly aggregated in the gown. They burst forth volcanically the dense mass of roses and branches we understand to be the figure's head and upper torso. The figure's visual weight and darkness emanates an attitude of sadness and solitude. The figure seems to literally fall apart, dissolve, and then reconstitute itself. We can imagine this metamorphic figure walking through dark woods. The tightly patterned skirt seems to be under a constructive force while her head is more chaotic and

in a state of disintegration. The loose flowers that trail behind *Daphne* somehow repulsively read like pieces of flesh that have come off her body. Sultan reveals, “the work embodies the concept of corporeal growth and decomposition within the elemental progressions of nature’s cycles.”<sup>14</sup>

What are the similarities and differences between my work and Coyne’s figure? My sculpture opens up a landscape belonging to alternate world. The landscape also allows viewers to enter a situation because there is implied action. The grotto has opened up and it is expelling its liquids. Why? What is going to happen to the characters or viewers within this scene? Why are we confronted with this image of death? Coyne’s *Daphne* does not invite us to an environment like my work, but we can imagine the landscape from which she is taken. My work and Coyne’s work both respond to earlier narratives and we wish to re-interpret them. I reference a biblical Expulsion narrative. Through this reference I invite viewers to a dystopian future. We see the aftermath of destructive practices that could include deforestation, overconsumption, and the pollution of our natural environments. Humans have brought about nature’s death and we are invited to see the spectacular and grand finale. Coyne references Greek mythology. She wishes to revive a literary past to express personalized emotions in a contemporary setting. Nature in her work reveals our closeness to nature, death, and its cycles. Her artificial nature is alive, however. It is a moving figure. Even though my work is about death, my artificial landscape is alive as well and it encompasses viewers. We are passive observers in Coyne’s work. We can only speculate about the character that she presents. Viewers are actors in my work, invited to experience the situation at hand. Coyne’s work is an artwork placed within the gallery context and consequently the space is not transformed.

### Artificial Nature: The Kitsch Experience

Representations of nature can be found everywhere, whether in the context of art or in consumer culture. In her book, *The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience*, Celeste Olalquiaga proposes that the kitsch experience, that is, surrounding ourselves with fake representations of nature, represents a longing for nature and helps us preserve the experience of the natural realm. She looks at this question in the context of the Victorian age. Objects, or in some cases actual artificial landscapes can transport us to new worlds. Memories are ignited, and imagination takes flight in these artificial objects or landscapes that are really reflections of our own inner life.

In the first chapter of her book, Olalquiaga explains that she stays at an extravagant Victorian Mansion, a bed-and-breakfast in San Francisco. Each room in the mansion is decorated in honor of a turn-of-the-century guest. The author is especially attracted to the Jack London Room. The marine-themed room resonates with her. She says, “I had found a private décor where my feelings could manifest themselves outwardly in the most palpable of ways, as if having walked into a long-forgotten attic.”<sup>15</sup> The room the author walks into is a landscape that reflects an inner world. Once in the room, the author comes across Rodney, a hermit crab trapped in a glass bubble. The author is transfixed by the creature and in her long and poetic description of this kitsch object, her mind is transported to a fantastic marine habitat. The projection of her psyche onto the object ignites in her memories from another place and time, however immemorial and imaginary.

Olalquiaga relates her hypothesis explaining why a kitsch-collecting mania developed during the Victorian period. As British life, predominantly agrarian, became industrialized, this left a psychological void in the middle class. Estranged from the experience of nature, and now

working in closed-off factories, people needed to recreate it. People invested in an over-the-top style that culled references from the natural world. Flora and fauna of all kinds could be found on wallpaper and furniture, or in petrified specimens. Artificial constructions of nature were valued in a way that the natural realm was not. For example, people during this time constructed anthropomorphized animal-taxidermy dioramas. People culled things from nature only to reconstruct them in decorative objects that reflected personal longings and utopian desires.

The kitsch aesthetic is a culturally produced phenomenon tied to mass-production. In the chapter, “The Intoxication of Modernity,” in *The Artificial Kingdom*, Olalquiaga differentiates between authenticity and uniqueness. Notions of authenticity are tied to original, one-of-a-kind objects. Mass production inevitably destroys authenticity through repetition. Paradoxically, although kitsch items are mass-produced, they can still be regarded as unique or special by their perceiver. She explains,

The domestic aquarium fad that hit Victorian England during the 1850’s and 1860’s may be considered, along with its direct antecedent, the collecting of ferns, a true mass-culture phenomenon: one where an object or a cluster of objects becomes the focus of an obsessive and pervasive consumption that, despite its seriality or multiplicity, is felt as intimately personal.<sup>16</sup>

Kitsch items are culturally produced commodities that may acquire sentimental value.

Olalquiaga says, “kitsch is a time capsule with a two-way ticket to the realm of myth—the collective or individual land of dreams.”<sup>17</sup>

For Olalquiaga, another defining characteristic of Victorian kitsch is a sense of loss. She relates, “The changes brought about by the aura’s shattering are not limited to its dismantling and dispersion—and ensuing obsessive collection—but also consummate a centuries-old sense of

loss manifested in a highly visual aesthetics of saturation, artifice and melancholia...”<sup>18</sup> The author hypothesizes that the loss of organic nature’s aura is compensated for by the visual saturation of the kitsch aesthetic.

All of my projects to date employ artificial representations of nature for the purposes of transporting us to imaginary realms. Like the people of the Victorian era, I collect but then reconstruct and re-assemble. Instead of allowing a singular kitsch item to take us somewhere new through projection, I try to open up the imagined landscape. The memory, then, becomes a palpable and spatial embodied experience.

In my latest project, *Yellow Box*, I more directly reference Olalquiaga’s definition of the kitsch aesthetic as it pertains to the Victorian era (Figure 13 through 15). The central character in the story, a young woman, has accumulated many kitsch or mass-produced items that reference real organic nature. The extensive collection contains porcelain and glass animals, plants, vases, figurines, and plates. (Figure 15) She is living in a dystopian future where the natural realm is barely visible within the human sphere. It only exists in secluded preservations. She values the collection that allows her to preserve ideas of nature, however distorted they are.

In my installation, *Yellow Box*, I show the aftermath of a magical occurrence. The installation is inspired by an invented narrative. In the story, a young woman has a penchant for collecting idealized and kitsch items. Her materialism is difficult to understand but it is something ironically nurtured by her parents and also her consumer-driven society. She keeps a pet yellow canary in her room. This canary is very intelligent and has magical powers. The teenager and the bird share a special bond that any caring pet owner could understand. The bird is undeniably a part of the family. Every triumphant occasion and every somber moment is felt deeply by the bird.

One day, for fateful reasons, the bird escapes the confines of the home. The bird's magical endurance allows it to fly all over the world and it experiences a loss of innocence as it realizes the current state of the planet. The bird is aghast to find there is not a single forest where it can plant its feet. Additionally, it cannot find another bird in the acidic skies that are now inhabited by supersonic monsters. The dead silence of suburban streets differs from the clamor of chaotic cities. Even worse, the resounding sounds coming from beastly industrial plots make the bird feel as if caught in a nightmare. Tired and sick, the bird returns home.

Something strange happens upon the bird's arrival. The bird makes its way back discreetly into the room, but as soon as its feet touch the stand of its cage, it dies, falls, and transforms into a spill that is also the origin of the chameleon-like color change in the room. The bird's preoccupations, its internal knowledge, and its emotional angst flow from its body in a moment of magical catharsis. These waves of emotion travel through the room, activate the furniture, and make palpable the bird's internal conflict. (Figure 16)

The spiritual energy within the bird that causes the color change in the room is related to the idea of the ether. In Marina Warner's book, *Phantasmagoria*, she explains that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, new discoveries were being made about the consistency of air. People tried to capture electromagnetic fields and light waves on film.<sup>19</sup> In some cases, doctors believed that the lights being captured on camera were physical manifestations of a spirit force or a soul. Today these experiments have no validity but I certainly relate to the idea that the spirit can be manifested physically. After the bird dies, the room is magically different. Everything is yellow, off kilter, and shaken, as if having been under the influence of an earthquake tremor (Figures 14 and 15).

I will describe *Yellow Box* as an installation. The viewer is presented with an over-the-top theatrical situation. In the room we see hutch furniture with curvilinear embellishments. The

color yellow predominates in the room and can be found on the walls, on the furniture and on all of the objects. The room is rendered strange by this coloration. (Figure 13) It has come under the influence of the canary, implied by the birdcage and the color yellow. We see an excess of glossy objects that are covered in glitter. There is clear tension between the yellow room and the green and black vegetation that has invaded it. (Figure 15) Nature is bringing death but an altar has formed around the birdcage indicating it is special within the narrative. (Figure 16) The excess in materials combined with the color yellow heightens our awareness of human materialism. The yellow functions as a warning signal.

My title, *Yellow Box*, makes reference to a precautionary code within weather alert systems. A “Yellow Box” warns that weather conditions are suitable for the development of severe thunderstorms. Meteorologists may literally draw a yellow box around areas that can potentially experience severe weather. In the narrative, we see the very beginnings of an adverse situation that can become disastrous. The yellow box of the story warns us about Earth’s symbolic climate conditions. The conditions may lead to something apocalyptic.

Kitsch items have the power to transport us to imaginary realms and they are normally delectable to the eye. We receive sensorial pleasure from kitschy materials because they are idealized and attractive. Kia Niell is an emerging contemporary artist who recognizes that fake representations of nature have the capacity to transport us to idealized, fantastic, and utopian spaces. Her work is not overtly political because it does not address or even hint at our current environmental crisis. She embraces the escapist possibilities of artificial nature. In her online statement she claims, “I am interested in the way nature is represented in home décor, fashion and kitsch items (such as glitter encrusted silk flowers), how kitsch can offer possibilities for fantasy and escape, and how these artifices reveal cultural desires and understanding of

nature.”<sup>20</sup>

Kia Neill installed a very large fake grotto at the Lawndale Arts Center in Houston Texas. (See figures 17 and 18) Her *Grotto* immerses viewers in a room and fantastic landscape. The choice to install her grotto directly outside the second-floor elevator is interesting. Reality as we know it, and as it is culturally constructed, is suspended in a single step when we get off the elevator. We suddenly enter a wonderful space conceived by the artist. On her site she explains that the space is large, singular, and enclosed. Her grotto is unlike any other grotto on Earth. The grotto is composed of artificial materials including paper-mache, wood, joint compound, and lights. The lights blink and also change colors. Her crystals seem to be made of plexi-glass. Large stalactites hang from the ceiling. The artist explains that the experience of being in her work can be likened to “standing inside a giant inverted disco ball.”<sup>21</sup>

In comparing *Yellow Box* to Neill’s *Grotto*, I note that both of our artworks invite viewers into an imaginary and seductive setting. Her multi-colored crystal chunks glisten within the irregular space of the grotto. Neill’s project references the natural realm because it resembles the form of a real grotto. My installation references a human room, specifically that of a young woman. In my work, viewers are involved in a narrative with circumstances. One may ask, what has happened to the room? What is happening?

The installation reflects a dystopian future. In our present we confront the conditions of a not too distant future. This is strategic. Although this is an imaginary setting, it is a symbolic representation of what our future may look like. Our current actions against the natural realm have the potential to bring death upon us. Our idealized constructions of nature are not equivalent to reality. Humans collect what is beautiful while just outside of our windows the natural realm experiences the negative consequences of our cultural constructions. I pop our *Vie-*



*en-rose* bubble and turn it a cautionary yellow. The yellow in the project is visually seductive but simultaneously warns us of danger to come.

There is a powerful online documentary titled *Green* by Patrick Rouxel. It is about deforestation in Indonesia. The palm trees of the forest supply the wood and oil we need to sustain our ways of life internationally. This story of rampant destruction is told from the perspective of an orangutan because he is the focus of the filmmaker's camera. After an entire forest is decimated, the orangutan hangs pathetically from the only tree that has not been cut. After the tree is cut down, the orangutan is taken to a shelter. This wild animal does not know how to function in the four-walled enclosure of the room. The film captures how this animal dies of sadness on a thin mattress on the floor. Deprived of his habitat, it appears that the animal goes into a depression that barely allows him to move or eat. In the last shot of the film we see that his body is carried off in black plastic bag inside of a wheelbarrow. In viewing such things, one can't help but wonder, what if the natural realm had collective agency and could respond to our actions? When natural disasters occur, people anthropomorphize nature and say that Mother Nature is angry. In my installation, the implied bird is similar to the orangutan who has experienced the negative consequences of our destructive actions. In my work the bird dies like the orangutan but its death triggers the beginnings of the cautionary cataclysm.

### Artificial Nature and Grotesque Bodies

To understand my work in relation to the grotesque, I must first define the concept. In his book, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture*, Francis S. Connelly gives a great overview of the term in his introduction. That which is grotesque exists in a liminal state. It is not distinctly one thing or another. He explains, "... the one consistent visual attribute of the grotesque is that

of flux. Whether aberrant metamorphic, or combinatory, grotesques are all in a transitional in between state of being. Blurring categories, the grotesque pulls us into a liminal state of multiple possibilities.”<sup>22</sup> In the book one learns that at the end of the 1400’s, the ruins of Nero’s Palace, the Domus Aurea, were excavated in Rome. Connelly explains that the walls of the palace had “whimsical combinations of plants, figures, mythical creatures, and architectural elements.”<sup>23</sup> The rooms of the palace in that subterranean setting resembled grottoes and so “the fantastic and bizarre inventions found there came to known as grottesche.”<sup>24</sup>

The author explains that “an elaborate table decoration, combining all sorts of vegetables, fruits, and flowers” is not necessarily grotesque.<sup>25</sup> In the moment when these things combine to form “a portrait head just as convincing as a still life, as in Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s brilliant inventions, they turn grotesque.”<sup>26</sup> I have included his example (Figure 19).

Many contemporary artists employ the grotesque in their work. Petah Coyne’s *Daphne*, for example, is an in-between figure, referencing not merely a human body but also something tree-like. The monstrosity of the figure comes from its organic irregularity and its hybrid bodily state. (Figure 12) All of my artworks, *The Fairest of Them All*, *Expulsion II*, and *Yellow Box*, incorporate the grotesque. In *The Fairest of Them All*, for example, is the viewer looking at a highly ornamented mirror, a fantastic grotto, or a strange and giant human bodily orifice? I suggest it is all of these things and that is part of its allure (Figures 1-3). In my project *Expulsion II*, is the sculpture a highly decorated grotto, a bodily opening, or a threatening creature with tentacles? (Figures 5 and 6) The amalgamation of disparate references gives the cave its strangeness. Even in my latest project, *Yellow Box*, the dazzling yellow room turns grotesque when one body, the body of the natural realm, takes over the human sphere. The room symbolizes the body of human culture and materialism. (Figure 13)

Contemporary artist Kate MacDowell deliberately employs the grotesque as a political tool to assert her definition of nature. Some of her artworks show a dystopian relationship between humans and other beings of the natural realm. The majority of her beautiful and grotesque porcelain works share the same message. Plants, animals, and humans all belong to the same body. (Figures 20-22) The hierarchy our culture establishes between humans and the natural realm is dissolved. In her work *Migrant*, for example, human feet with roots have no body. This figure has been violently cut at the ankles like a cut tree that leaves behind its stump. To add realism to the situation, the artist leaves a small wood chip on the figure's right foot to show the remains of the act. (Figure 20) In a different work, *Casualty*, a porcelain rabbit carcass has been sliced open to reveal a human skeleton. In MacDowell's work, nature's beings are intertwined with humans and share the same fate. (Figure 21) In a final example, *Canary*, open human lungs reveal seven canaries that stand on bronchi that double as branches. (Figure 22) The majority of MacDowell's works are combinatory grotesques. This means they combine distinct forms to form new entities.

MacDowell's work conjures up a nice quote contained in the book, *Spell of the Sensuous*, where ecologist and philosopher David Abram relates his belief that the path we follow as a society, one of disconnection to nature, is problematic because it strips away the very essence of what makes us human:

Caught up in a mass of abstractions, our attention hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only reflect us back to ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities. Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth—our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn

these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.<sup>27</sup>

The human capacity to symbolize originated in a primal scenario where humans had close psychic ties to their natural environment. Contemporary arguments that say there is no such thing as nature too easily dispel this vital relationship that existed and whose effects are still present today.

My works and MacDowell's are significantly different but we share similarities. Her objects read as distinct art objects. She follows a certain tradition of creating lap-sized works in porcelain. Her work does not open up landscapes but she shows us fragments of certain scenarios that have already occurred. Her titles, such as *Icarus* or *Daphne* allude to narratives, as in my work. In the real world, porcelain objects that reference nature are almost always idealized. MacDowell subverts idealized representations of nature by utilizing a grotesque strategy. Even as her work becomes grotesque, it remains beautiful as it reveals layers of content that are relevant today.

Kiki Smith is a feminist artist known for her sculptural bodies that subvert traditional representations of women throughout history. Smith's figures are psychologically charged and they express ideas about bodily experience. Like MacDowell, Smith employs the grotesque to show human proximity to nature. It is evident in Smith's works that she too believes that humans are a part of the natural realm and not above it. The artist often alludes to narratives, incorporating references from fairy tales and other mythological stories to re-assign meaning.

I would like to examine two Kiki Smith works from her exhibit *Telling Tales* from 2001. In the exhibition catalog by the same name, curator Helaine Posner explains the artist created three multi-media environments, including "sculpture, color photographs, paintings and

drawings, stop animation videotapes, and evocative soundtracks to immerse the viewer in her imaginary worlds.”<sup>28</sup> Smith retells the story of Little Red Riding Hood in four works, *Daughter*, *Genevieve and the May Wolf*, *Bronze Wolf*, and *Gang of Girls and Pack of Girls* but I will discuss two of them.

In the fairy tale, *Little Red Riding Hood*, a girl is on her way to visit her grandmother. In the forest she comes across an anthropomorphized and ill-intentioned wolf. She reveals to him where she is going. The wolf rushes off to the grandmother’s home, eats her, and disguises himself as his victim. When Riding Hood reaches the house, she sees that the door latch has been left open. She recognizes that something is different about her grandmother but before she finishes questioning the wolf, she is also eaten. This story has symbolic layers; it warns children against strangers and it also warns girls about being drawn in too easily by “wolves.”

Kiki Smith re-imagines the story. In the catalog, one learns that her paper sculpture, *Daughter*, is the hybrid offspring of Red Riding Hood and the wolf. (Figure 23) Posner reveals that in Smith’s story the wolf is no longer an enemy but a friend.<sup>29</sup> This is also demonstrated in her work *Gang of Girls and Pack of Wolves*. In these paintings on screens many Riding Hoods and many wolves join together to form a pack.<sup>30</sup> (Figure 24)

My work, *The Fairest of Them All* is similar to Kiki Smith’s *Telling Tales* project. We both reference fairy tales and subvert their message. In my project beauty is not ascribed to humans but rather to the natural realm. The ability to understand ourselves in relation to nature is celebrated. Smith subverts the human-animal relations in Little Red Riding Hood. The wolf is no longer an enemy, but a friend, and in the case of *Daughter*, even a father.

There is one more artist I would like to discuss in relation to the grotesque. Mat Collishaw is not known for creating hybrid grotesques but his installation, *Sordid Earth*, is

relevant to this subject and to my *Expulsion II*. I first came across Mat Collishaw's work online when I found his *Infectious Flowers Series*. The artist is known for referencing Victorian aesthetics but always with the intention of undermining the beauty that is presented. To create these photographs, he grafted diseased human skin on flowers. On his website he explains that he was inspired by the book, *À Rebours, (Against Nature)* by JK Huysmans. In the story a man collects flowers with tropical diseases. Collishaw says the images also reference Jean Genet's journals describing a cellmate who was covered in wounds that looked like adornments. The *Infectious Flowers Series* provided the platform for his work, *Sordid Earth*.

In *Sordid Earth*, Collishaw's infectious flowers come alive, growing and decaying, amidst wild rain and powerful rainfalls. (Figure 25) Viewers confront an imposing and beautiful projected landscape. The projection can be viewed externally or within the structure. The work is a massive video installation that required 15 projectors. His video was projected onto architect Ron Arad's structure, *Curtain Call*, a 360-degree screen composed of 5,600 hanging silicon rods. The artist created a visceral environment depicting a dangerous and revengeful natural realm. The apocalyptic and often biblically-themed works of John Martin, a 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape painter, also inspired Collishaw's vision of the turbulent environment.

Like Collishaw, in *Expulsion II*, I try and offer viewers an embodied experience. His project is a truly immersive one because it engages several senses. The bright lights engage viewers' sight while the sound engages the aural senses. Since his project is a video, it has the added effect of motion in time. We can see his metamorphic-grotesque flowers actually undergo their transformations. They live, become diseased, and then die. My sculpture, *Expulsion II* is a representation of a grotto that has undergone a metamorphic transformation. It does not actually move. His project is illusory and temporal. As soon as the projection is shut off, his work does

not exist. My project is a concrete object in space. It can be touched. Both of our projects represent landscapes from an apocalyptic and dystopian future. Nature is anthropomorphized when it acquires self-consciousness.

### Artificial Landscapes and the Carnavalesque

The carnivalesque, as the words suggests, is associated with carnivals. In the chapter, *A Carnival Sense of the World*, included in the mutli-authored book, *Carnavalesque*, Timothy Hyman summarizes the history of the carnivalesque. During the middle ages, carnivals traditionally preceded the somber Lenten season. It was a time when people had permission to indulge and forego established rules. Hyman cites Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, who analyzed the 16<sup>th</sup> century French writer, Rabelais and the popular culture of the Middle Ages in his book *Rabelais and His World*. Hyman notes that “Bakhtin’s carnivalesque invokes a laughter linked to the overturning of authority; it is ‘that peculiar folk humor that has always existed and has never merged with the official culture of the ruling classes.’”<sup>31</sup> In his study, Hyman lists four core themes in the carnivalesque: the tumultuous crowd, the world turned upside down, the comic mask and the grotesque body. My work is mostly concerned with the world turned upside down, in *Yellow Box*, and the grotesque body in the remaining works.

Inherent to the carnivalesque is a sense of topsy-turviness that comes from paradox, reversals, or the confrontation of oppositional ideas. Hyman explains, “This carnival overturning generates new imagery; everything known to us can be shown in systematically altered relationship.”<sup>32</sup> The reversal in *Yellow Box* is the power relation between human culture and the natural realm. Humans are no longer in power and the natural realm takes over a space representing human culture. The way our culture controls nature is exemplified in the animal

agri-industry, in the agri-industry through the genetic modification of foods, and in animal testing, to cite examples. I offer an imaginary space where the natural realm and its non-human beings exact revenge for our transgressions.

Another example of a carnivalesque reversal in literature can be found in Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Mask of the Red Death." In this story, an awful plague spreads throughout a land. The victims of the plague can be recognized by bloodstains on their skin because bleeding occurs through the pores. Prince Prospero owns an abbey and invites at least one thousand friends to stay with him in this abbey that he decides to seal hermetically. The king and his friends remain impervious to the suffering outside their confines. The atmosphere within the abbey is festive but one day the prince holds a particularly lavish masquerade ball. Six rooms are decorated in six distinct monochromatic colors including blue, green, orange, white, purple, and black. The rooms are so lavishly decorated with golden ornaments on the ceiling that interior lighting is not needed within the rooms. A protected fire lights up the corridor. During the masquerade ball there is a large clock that chimes at every hour. The people at the ball pause to listen to the clock and then resume their celebration when it stops chiming. One day when the clock marks midnight, the guests suddenly become aware of the presence of a stranger. He provokes suspicion and then terror when they notice he looks ill as if affected by the Red Death. Prince Prospero is not amused by the character who he assumes to be wearing a disguise like the rest of the masquerading guests. This joke, to dress as a victim of the Red Death, is too heavy. He asks for the stranger to be hanged but no one dares come close. The stranger walks through the seven rooms before Prospero gathers the courage to follow and kill him. In the final room he reaches the stranger who turns around. As soon they face each other Prospero falls dead. He has met the personification of death. After this happens the rest of the guests also die under the



influence of the plague. In the carnivalesque, binary categories are frequently reversed. In the story, the realm that is healthy, festive, pleasurable, beautiful turns into its grotesque opposite, death, disease and suffering. Similarly to this story, in *Yellow Box*, the human sphere with its material decadence and peace is disrupted by the natural realm that comes to consume it. (Figure 13)

In his book, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*, David K. Danow defines the carnivalesque in fiction. He says, “it supports the unsupportable, assails the unassailable, at times regards supernatural as natural, takes fiction as truth, and makes the extraordinary or ‘magical’ as viable a possibility as the ordinary or ‘real,’ so that no true distinction is perceived or acknowledged between the two.”<sup>33</sup> The 1986 film, “The Labyrinth,” is an example of a carnivalesque and magical realist cinema. The story is very simple and seems almost ludicrous in its extravagant details. In the beginning, Sarah Williams, played by a young Jennifer Connelly, is angered when her parents admonish her for coming home late when she is supposed to take care of her baby brother. In a moment of resentment she wishes her brother Toby would disappear. Moments later, She realizes her brother is gone. The Goblin King, David Bowie, says that Sarah must solve a labyrinth in thirteen hours if she is to recover her brother. In the labyrinth she comes across all kinds of funny and anthropomorphized creatures that are also Jim Henson muppets. There are good creatures and also ill-intentioned ones that try to divert her from her path. In the end she recovers her brother and is overjoyed. The artificial landscape in the movie provides the backdrop for this journey of self-discovery.

My work is related to the carnivalesque-grotesque body in addition to the metamorphic and combinatory grotesque I have already discussed. The carnivalesque grotesque presents us with open bodily spaces. In *Expulsion II*, the grotto has an opening that spills forth its internal

and dark fluids. It enters upon the viewer's space. Hyman explains that the grotesque body within the context of the carnivalesque is a "conscious repudiation of the closed body of the renaissance, in which all protuberances will be smoothed down all apertures closed."<sup>34</sup> Hyman tell us that the grotesque body of the carnivalesque is related to Bakhtin's 'Unfinished' Body, "parading its lumpy extensions, pregnant with liquids."<sup>35</sup> In both *The Fairest of Them All* and in *Expulsion II* the sculptures are opened and bulbous, they allude to human bodies even though they first read as grottoes.

In *The Body of Nature and Culture*, Australian professor Rodd Giblett further defines the carnivalesque grotesque body. He states, "the grotesque body is the belching, farting, gluttonous, lusting, creative, procreative body; it is a body having sex, giving birth, being born, eating and shitting, living and dying; it is the body of the marketplace (as distinct from the market) and it is the popular body, as distinct from the official body."<sup>36</sup> Giblett refers to the subversive and carnival-celebrating crowds of the middle ages as seen in Rabelais' works. This crowd is the popular body of the rowdy marketplace that stands in opposition to the official or authoritative body of the church. During carnival time it became acceptable to expose taboo human physiological processes. My landscapes are alive because they undergo these processes. Giblett expands on a feature of the carnivalesque-grotesque body when he says, "The grotesque is a dangerous swamp of monstrosity. Grotesque places are not only geographical but also corporeal places. Grotesque places are physical places, both earthly and bodily."<sup>37</sup> My *Expulsion II* fits Giblett's definition of the grotesque. It alludes, at once to an earthly place, a grotto, but also a corporeal one as well, a female birthing center.

## Conclusion

Since time immemorial the natural realm has provided the sensory material that inspires human language with its rich metaphors, analogies, and symbols. The natural realm provides the substance for our physical and emotional well-being. Personal ideas, thoughts and emotions are expressed more powerfully when we draw comparisons between observed phenomena and our lived experiences. Humanity's wellbeing can be determined in part by how it relates to the natural environment. If there is tension between human culture and the natural realm, this will manifest itself physically through disease, death, and decay, either in the human sphere or in the natural realm.

Many philosophers believe that one of the most pressing issues of our time is to establish a harmonious relationship with the natural environment. This is an imperative need in light of our current environmental crisis. We need to reconsider our cultural assumptions regarding the natural realm. Our cultural anthropocentrism and our claims of superiority are absurd in a world where the natural realm experiences ongoing destruction. Our manipulative practices within the natural realm will have a parallel and negative effect on us because we are interdependent with this sphere.

Art can help us recognize the importance of the natural realm and also our connectedness to it. As we have seen, artificial landscapes are metaphorical environments that reflect the complexity of our lived experiences. Artificial landscapes can be found in the context of contemporary art, in film, and in literature. My artificial landscapes are anthropomorphized creations that channel personal feelings regarding our current environmental climate. By alluding to such themes as Romanticism, the Kitsch Aesthetic, the Grotesque Body, and the

Carnavalesque, I am able to create immersive and complicated scenarios that provide spaces where we can reflect on our current cultural relations to the natural environment.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*, Ballantine Book (Ballantine Books, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Nature and Art as Needs of the Mind* (Liverpool University Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Terrie Sultan et al., *Damaged Romanticism: A Mirror of Modern Emotion* (D Giles Ltd, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Alan Drengrson and Yuichi Inoue, eds., *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology* (North Atlantic Books, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Sultan et al., *Damaged Romanticism*.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism and ARAS, *The Book Of Symbols: Reflections On Archetypal Images* (Taschen, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Sultan et al., *Damaged Romanticism*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience*, First edition, second printing (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Kia Neill, Artist Website, *Kia Neill*, n.d., <http://www.kianeill.com/kianeill.com/ABOUT.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Kia Neill, Artist Website, *Kia Neill*, n.d., [http://www.kianeill.com/kianeill.com/Grotto\\_1.html](http://www.kianeill.com/kianeill.com/Grotto_1.html).

<sup>22</sup> Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, 1st Vintage Books Ed (Vintage, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Helaine Posner and Kiki Smith, *Kiki Smith: Telling Tales* (International Center of Photography, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Timothy Hyman and Roger Malbert, *Carnavalesque*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> David Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2004).

---

<sup>34</sup> Hyman and Malbert, *Carnavalesque*.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Rod Giblett, *The Body of Nature and Culture*, 1st ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

---

Works Cited

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-human World*. New York: Pantheon, 1996. Print.
- Connelly, Frances S. *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. Print.
- Danow, David K. *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 1995. Print.
- Drengson, Alan R., and Yuichi Inoue. *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 1995. Print.
- Giblett, Rodney James. *The Body of Nature and Culture*. Basingstoke [England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.
- Hyman, Timothy, and Roger Malbert. *Carnavalesque*. London: Hayward Gallery Pub., 2000. Print.
- Olalquiaga, Céleste. *The Artificial Kingdom*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002. Print.
- Ronnberg, Ami, and Kathleen Martin. *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*. Köln: Taschen, 2010. Print.
- Smith, Kiki, and Helaine Posner. *Kiki Smith: Telling Tales*. New York, NY: International Center of Photography, 2001. Print.
- Sultan, Terrie, and Nick Flynn. *Damaged Romanticism: A Mirror of Modern Emotion*. Houston, TX: Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston, 2008. Print.
- Tarnas, Richard. *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*. New York: Ballantine, 1993. Print.
- Warner, Marina. *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.