

June 5–September 13, 2015

# organic matters

women to watch 2015



Virginia Treanor

What is nature? How do we perceive it? Are we, as humans, part of it or separate from it? How does it shape us, and vice versa? These are some of the questions that artists explore in *Organic Matters*, the fourth exhibition in NMWA's Women to Watch series.

Presented every two to three years, Women to Watch is a dynamic collaboration between the museum and its national and international outreach committees. This year, an unprecedented thirteen participating committees worked with curators in their regions to create shortlists of emerging and underrepresented artists working with the subject of nature. NMWA curators then selected the artists whose work is on view in *Organic Matters*. The contemporary artists highlighted here actively investigate the natural world. They build upon and expand ideas explored in *Super Natural* (pages 8–13), especially the historical dynamics that often equated nature with the feminine.

The artworks in *Organic Matters* address modern society's complex relationship with the environment, ranging from concern for its future to fear of its power. Through a diverse array of mediums, including photography, drawing, sculpture, and

video, these artists depict fragile ecosystems, otherworldly landscapes, and creatures both real and imagined.

Today, concerns for the safety and survival of the environment are more mainstream than ever before, and many artists allude to these issues in their work. *Monoculture* (2013), by Dawn Holder (b. 1976, Arkansas Committee), obliquely references humans' detrimental manipulation of nature in her manicured porcelain "lawn." The fragility of Holder's piece echoes the preciousness of the resource that is commandeered to maintain green lawns across the country: water. By calling attention to the use of water for ornamental spaces, Holder questions the sustainability and necessity of such a practice.

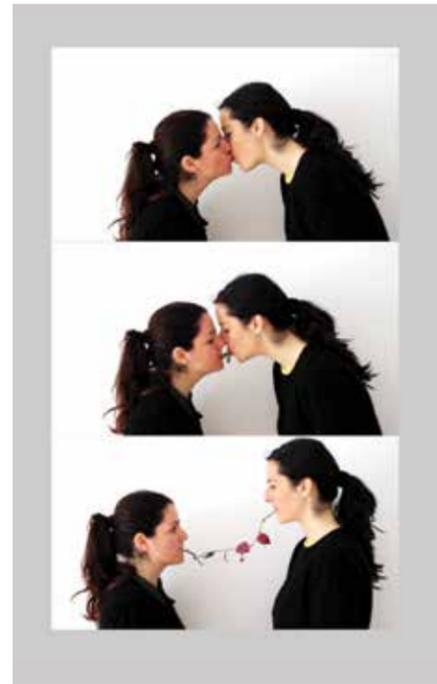
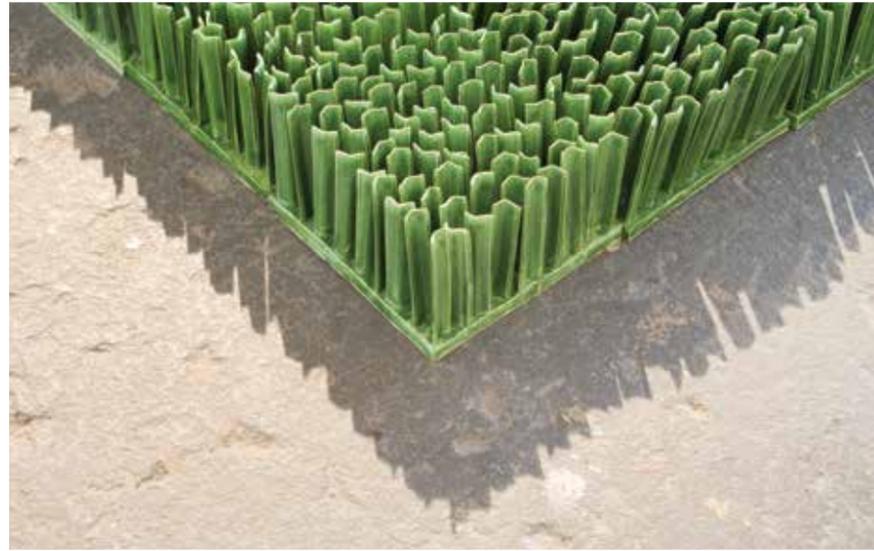
Similarly, the meticulous drawings of Jennifer Celio (b. 1972, Southern California Committee) make explicit the threat of human encroachment on the natural world. In her dystopic environments, Celio blends the urban and rural, resulting in uncomfortable juxtapositions. The absurdity of food trucks and oil rigs depicted in a national park or the disturbing adaptations of organisms to a polluted environment serve as harbingers of a future best avoided.

Clockwise from top: Goldschmied & Chiari, *Nymphs* #12, 2007; Color print, 49 1/4 x 131 in.; Courtesy of the Podesta Collection

Rebecca Hutchinson, *Patterns of Nature* (detail), 2014; Porcelain paper clay, fiber, and organic material, 10 x 36 x 96 in.; Courtesy of the artist

Mimi Kato, *Landscape Retreat: In the Woods*, 2012; Archival pigment print diptych, each print 28 x 65 in.; Courtesy of the artist

Jiha Moon, *Peach Mask I*, 2013; Ink and acrylic on Hanji paper, 38 x 38 1/2 in.; Courtesy of the artist



Contemporary art often references the art of the past; the visually lush *Nymphs #12* by Italian duo **Goldschmied & Chiari** (b. 1975 and b. 1971, Gli Amici del NMWA), is a pastiche of Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*. The photograph, however, subverts the Impressionist's idyllic representation of nature by creating "lilies" out of plastic found floating in the Tiber river. While Monet's paintings were a way of escaping the polluted urban environments of the Industrial Revolution, Goldschmied & Chiari's work refuses to provide escape and instead confronts the viewer with the reality of the landscape.

The work of **Mimi Kato** (b. 1974, Ohio Advisory Group) likewise addresses the clash between urban environments and bucolic nature in her hybrid digital landscapes. Kato's urban green spaces, inspired by her memory of such landscapes in her native Japan, are a place of enforced and regulated recreation, invariably altering—and altered by—those who visit.

In some works, the natural world is the only protagonist. **Ysabel LeMay** (b. 1966, Texas State Committee) conveys a sense of respite and refuge from the civilized world in *Reflection* (2014), her hyper-manipulated image of flora and fauna. LeMay's nature

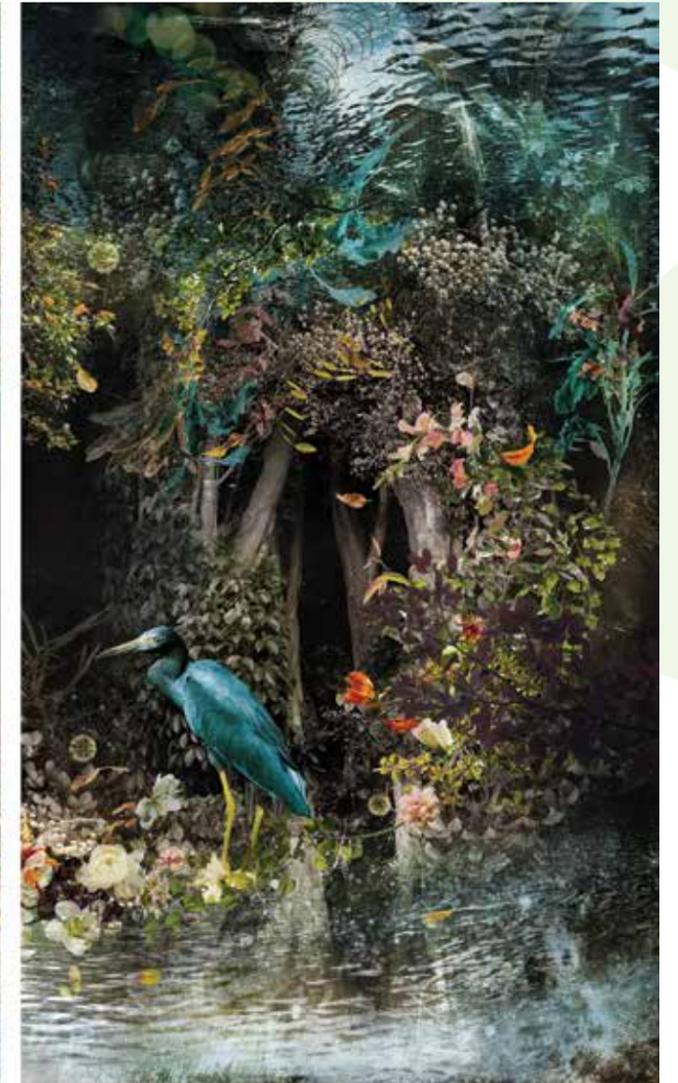
Opposite, clockwise from top left: Mary Tsiongas, *The Mercurial Dog Anticipates Her*, 2013; LED monitor, 2-minute HD video loop, media player, and wooden frame, 33 x 24 x 4 in.; Courtesy of the artist and Richard Levy Gallery

Dawn Holder, *Monoculture* (detail), 2013; Porcelain, 2 1/2 x 92 x 176 in.; Courtesy of the artist

Andrea Lira, *RHYTHMS*, 2013; Video and animation; Courtesy of the artist

Lara Shipley, *In the Ozarks There Are Lights (Devil's Promenade)*, 2013; Inkjet print, 30 x 37 in.; Courtesy of the artist

Below: Ysabel LeMay, *Reflection*, 2014; Color print diptych, 61 x 72 in. overall; Courtesy of the artist



is a benevolent one in which the artist—and, by extension, the viewer—finds spiritual solace.

Nature is less benign in the hauntingly beautiful photographs by **Lara Shipley** (b. 1980, Greater Kansas City Area Committee). Her series "Devil's Promenade" sparks contemplation of how a rural culture is shaped by the landscape. Inspired by a local Ozark legend, Shipley references the mysterious Spook Light in the woods, an archetypal tale of humanity's primal fear of the wild and the unknown terrors that lurk there.

**Jiha Moon** (b. 1973, Georgia Committee) fuses nature and cul-

ture in her works in paint and ceramic, where repeated motifs of animals, fruit, and flowers offer a multiplicity of meaning. The peach, symbolic of her current home in Georgia, is also a symbol of happiness and longevity in Moon's native Korea.

Oversized people and animals are paired in dream-like vignettes in the work of **Françoise Pétrouitch** (b. 1964, Les Amis du NMWA), which stresses the relationship between species. Often, as in this untitled work, there is an ambiguity in the scene that hovers somewhere between enchantment and fear. This ambiguity allows for a myriad of interpretations and questions:

Who is the figure? Where is she? Is she dreaming of the bird? Is the bird friend or foe?

The productive and symbiotic relationship between humans and nature is captured in the video sequence *RHYTHMS* (2013) by **Andrea Lira** (b. 1981, Chile Committee). Lira uses organic

materials, found locally wherever she happens to be working, to create visual metaphors about the similarities of humans and plants in an effort to understand life's cycle. Her work speaks to the interdependence of humans and plants and the simultaneous fragility and tenacity of both.



**Mary Tsiongas** (b. 1959, New Mexico State Committee) also uses the medium of video to consider humans' interaction with nature in her enigmatic work *The Mercurial Dog Anticipates Her* (2013). Using technology to explore the relationship between humans and nature, Tsiongas's piece is also about nature and art mediated through digital technology. It raises questions about how we experience nature as well as art.

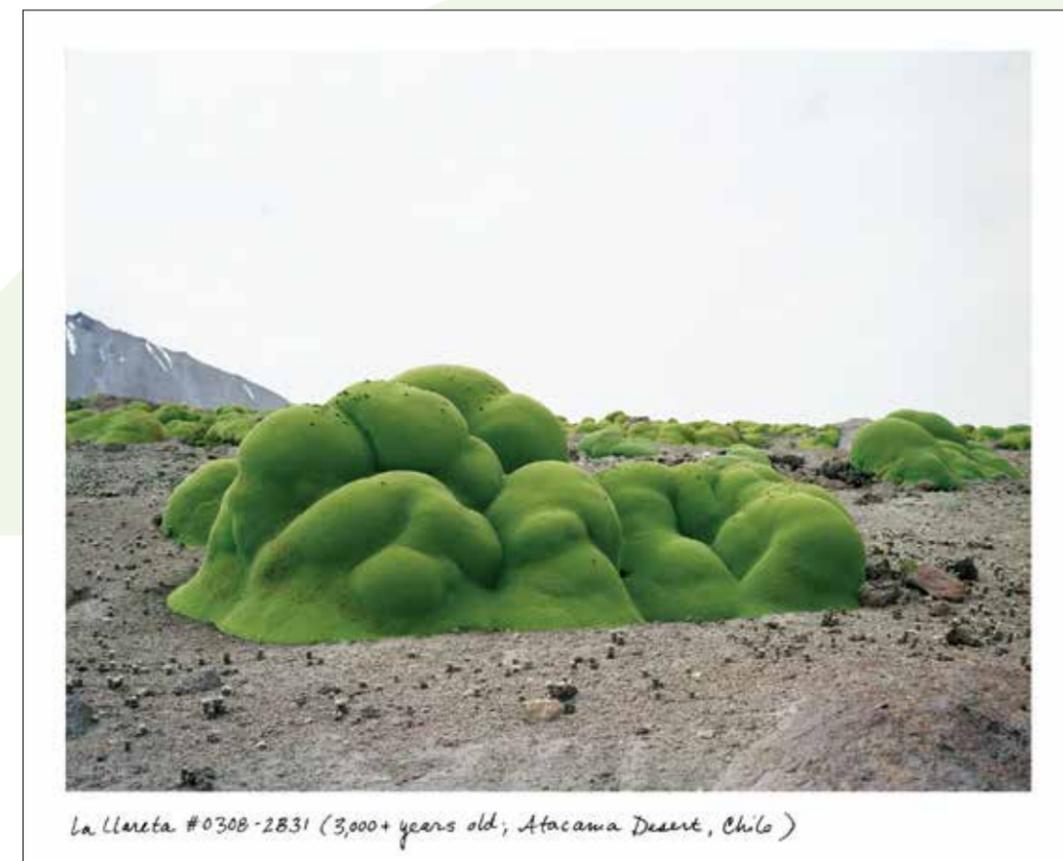
**Polly Morgan** (b. 1980, U.K. Friends of NMWA) uses taxidermy animals to address the primordial concerns of all organisms—life and death. The incessant cycle of life is captured in *Systemic Inflammation* (2010), a work that references the phoenix, a mythical bird that is reborn out of the flames of its own ashes. The orange birds, evoking the destructive and generative power of fire, perpetually lift the charred cage by tethers harnessed to their fragile bodies.

Like artists Maria Sibylla Merian and Rachel Ruysch before them, artists **Rachel Sussman** (b. 1975, Greater New York Committee) and **Rebecca Hutchinson** (b. 1962, Massachusetts State Committee) blend art and science to stunning effect. Sussman's empirical observations of the oldest living organisms on the planet highlight their beauty and their threatened singularity. Ethereal constructions by Hutchinson made from porcelain paper clay rejoice in the intricate beauty of plants that engineer themselves to suit their environments.

Considered together, these artists redefine women's—and humankind's—relationship to nature. Their works allow us to revel in nature's beauty while also forcing us to acknowledge its strength. All of them encourage thoughtful reflection and a renewed appreciation of how art can both reflect and affect our interaction with the world around us. By recognizing our impact on nature, both positive and negative, we grow to understand ourselves and the world in which we live.

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*Organic Matters—Women to Watch 2015 is organized by the National Museum of Women in the Arts and generously sponsored by its participating committees with additional support provided by the NMWA Advisory Board and the museum's members. Support for Les Amis du NMWA is provided by the GroW Annenberg Foundation, and support for Gli Amici del NMWA is provided by Vhernier.*



Opposite, clockwise from top left:  
 Jennifer Celio, *NIMBY (national park)*, 2012; Graphite on Yupo paper, 38 x 50 in.; Courtesy of the artist; Photography by Alan Shaffer  
 Polly Morgan, *Systemic Inflammation*, 2010; Taxidermy and steel, 51 1/8 x 44 1/2 x 44 1/2 in.; Private Collection, London; Photography by Tessa Angus  
 Françoise Pétrovitch, *Untitled*, 2014; Ink on paper, 63 x 94 1/2 in.; Courtesy of Semiose galerie, Paris; Photography by Hervé Plumet  
 Left: Rachel Sussman, *La Llaleta #0308-2B31 (3,000+ years old; Atacama Desert, Chile)*, 2008; Archival pigment prints on photo rag paper, 44 x 54 in.; Courtesy of the artist