

Chloe

Waste
Arture

January 17 - March 1, 2014

Curated by Caroline Picard

GALLERY 400

Artists

Sebastian Alvarez, Art Orienté objet (Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin), Jeremy Bolen, Irina Botea, Agnes Meyer-Brandis, Robert Burnier, Marcus Coates, Assaf Evron, Carrie Gundersdorf, Institute of Critical Zoologists, Jenny Kendler, Devin King, Stephen Laphisophon, Milan Metthey, Rebecca Mir, Heidi Norton, Akosua Adoma Owusu, Tessa Siddle, and Xaviera Simmons

Events

Friday, January 17, 5:00-8:00pm

Ghost Nature Opening Reception

**Saturdays, January 25, February 1, and February 8,
1:00-4:00pm**

Pets on Paper, interactive pet sharing and drawing activity

**Fridays, February 7, February 21, and February 28
12:00-1:00pm**

Ghost Nature Reading Series, featuring poets and artists/authors

Wednesday, February 26, 7:00-8:30pm

And the Beat Goes On, film and video screening curated by Fern Silva

Support

Ghost Nature is supported by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; the School of Art and Art History, College of Architecture, Design and the Arts, University of Illinois at Chicago; and a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency. Howard and Donna Stone and Jeff Stokols and Daryl Gerber Stokols provide general support to Gallery 400 programs.

The galaxy we inhabit is comprised of a furious multitude of colliding, irregular and uncoordinated parts. Its constituents exist simultaneously over a vast range of scales, and conditions, each with its own set of proclivities. Some bodies are plastic. Others vegetal, atomic, muscular, or planetary. Each occupies its own temporal cycle: mushrooms live as little as a day, while dogs achieve adolescence after two years; stars, meanwhile, the far extreme, can take several billion years before they even begin to die. Within that teeming multiplicity, humanity has struggled to establish and maintain a sense of order, patrolling categories of plant, animal, and human in hierarchical anecdotes of progress. According to that hierarchy, living things are privileged over non-living materials and Nature has emerged as a Romantic ideal—an advertisement for the sublime, far away from the industrial undertow of human culture and capital production.

In *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010), Timothy Morton critiques such strident differentiation, emphasizing instead the constant flux of our environmental assemblage, wherein humankind's participation is as significant as any other species, living or inert. According to Morton, 'Nature' as a remote, over yonder, non-human place, does not exist at all. Instead we occupy a network of interlocking, interdependent parts. Humankind is wholly integrated within that "mesh" and as such, the Romantic desire to commune with a landscape untouched by human influence is impossible. No such place exists anymore. It is not clear that it ever did. Still, there remains an inherited desire to find that pristine, unpopulated locale. That desire is a glitch, the tickle of a phantom limb. As tantalizing as the image of snowy alps on a packet of Swiss Chocolate, a desire forever unfulfilled but nonetheless maddening. Using a wide range of media, from performance, sculpture, photography, drawing, and video, the artists in Ghost Nature investigate the borders and bounds between human and nonhuman experience, undermining vernacular strategies of landscape representation through which these sites have historically been examined.

Robert Burnier's material would seem definitively unnatural, and yet as a residual trace of a human production, it cannot be dismissed so quickly. Beginning with a flat, two-dimensional piece of aluminum, Burnier produces a three-dimensional object via a series of improvisational folds. Each fold adds new height and dynamism, while shrinking the

square footage of its original footprint. When discussing his process, he describes it in Situationist terms, as a *dérive* taking place on/with the surface of a malleable object, rather than the earth. The more Burnier works the surface, the more



Heidi Norton, *Anaphase Mutated*, 2014, glass, resin, plants, paint, wood, 61-1/2 x 52 in., courtesy the artist.

peculiarities emerge. He learns the emerging form as the piece generates depth, and it becomes a variant landscape on the wall.

Heidi Norton includes organic material in her work yet, like aluminum, these materials are harvested and refined from the material ingenuity of humans. Using an assortment of plants, glass, resin and paint, Norton creates half-living, semi-transparent picture planes. These reconfigured "landscapes" hover between literal and abstract representa-

tion. Often a plane of glass will sandwich bits and pieces of plant, like a microscopic slide, or a very clear wedge of amber. Sometimes the plant clippings die, sometimes they thrive,



Irina Botea (in collaboration with Nicu Ilfoveanu and Toni Cartu), still from *Picturesque*, 2013, video, 30:00 min., courtesy the artists

sometimes they mold. Though impossible to predict, resulting patterns of growth or decay participate directly in the final work's entire affect, which continues to mutate over time.

Like Norton's wall piece, Irina Botea's film also explores vegetal potency. In *Picturesque*, Botea and her collaborators, Nicu Ilfoveanu and Toni Cartu, follow a retired tour guide through the Romanian landscape in search of the expert's "picturesque" ideal. As the camera follows his lamenting commentary through wild, abandoned passages of lush and billowing vegetation, his disappointment becomes more palpable, illustrating the political nature of his antique ideal.

On a more intimate scale, Stephen Lapthisophon's root vegetables appear at rest, dormant and dead in the gallery space. As regular members of any household, they seem tame and banal. Over the course of the exhibit however, the vegetables change, shriveling in parts as they bloom into others with inorganic, grotesque, and anarchic life. In *Taking Care*, Lapthisophon places parsnips, turnips, and potatoes in a bucket with a burlap sack of ice. Replenishing the ice in the sack is a human act intended to counteract the vegetables' instability.

There are tiny, invisible events happening around and within us all of the time. CERN—the most powerful High Energy Particle accelerator laboratory in the world is dedicated precisely to such miniscule events. While visiting the

European laboratory, Jeremy Bolen photographed buildings surrounding the accelerator—run down modernist structures with angled faces and regimented windows. After bringing the film back to Illinois, he buried the film at Plot M, a nuclear waste burial ground used by the University of Chicago during its early, nuclear research. When Bolen later returned to the site, he found the undeveloped roll above ground, already, mysteriously unearthed. The resulting print collapses not only the geographical locations of Illinois and Geneva, but also records different visible and invisible presences above and below ground. The vertical strip of three CERN structures is compromised by a parallel fade-line—a trace of invisible Plot M and CERN energy crossing the film like a ghost passing through a wall, a trace of plasma left in its wake.

Abstract painter Carrie Gundersdorf toys with the limitation of human apprehension. Furthering her ongoing study of planetary bodies, she exhibits a large wall drawing, *Four Sections of Saturn's Rings* in the gallery's main room. At



Robert Burnier, *Eighteen*, 2013, Primer on aluminum, 14 x 22 in.

first glance the drawing looks like a color study—strips of pastel grays, yellows, pinks and blues lie at variant angles and values; the composition is simple, minimalist even, save for the margin's small nest of test scribbles. This drawing is a color

translation of black and white NASA photos of Saturn. Like the photograph, Gundersdorf condenses a massive amount of space and information into a human frame, grafting that conversion onto the language of abstract painting. Devin King intersects the scales of human and astronomical sites as well. In this case, King was influenced by the "founder of lunar topography." Johannes Hevelius was the first to map the entirety of the moon, using a telescope that permitted him only to see certain sections of the celestial body at once. Hevelius' 1647 maps compiled that observational data into a single, compressed image. Using an artist-made moon print, King makes cassette tape sleeves for a fictional band called *The Moon*—that image frames a backlit slide of a blurry band playing garage music in one cassette, in another the image of a street light at night in a back alley. King offers a particularly tiny, humble iteration of the human, its electricity and the moon, while also reflecting on the more general tendency to project human emotions and characteristics on non-human faces.

Multiple works in the show attempt to transcend an anthropocentric orientation to the world. Though earnest, these projected expectations tend to fail, exposing a longing to overcome the bounds of human experience. Rebecca Mir writes letters to her lover, the ocean. These letters will never be answered, despite earnest intentions. It is an unrequited, long distance affair. And though the effort might strain to suggest an anthropomorphic interpretation of that awesome salt-water body, the illiterate object of her affection defies translation, being ultimately too strange, too independent, unpredictable, and non-human. It is both one thing—an ocean—and many, comprised of parts, being full to the brim of ecologies, life forms, and variant depths: the beginning of life and a projected emissary of the human subconscious, defiant of both fixity and reason. Worn smooth by the ocean's physicality, the simple stone on the table is the clearest, most direct reply this nonhuman body could offer.

Although smooth to the touch, Assaf Evron's *Untitled (sRGB 1996)* presents itself like an organic object. Its form appears intentional, as an unfamiliar species might. Contrary to first impressions, it was produced by technology. The wooden and epoxy sculpture represents the limits of a particular computer's ability to produce color. Ideally, a computer would present a perfect sphere of color—white at one pole, pure black at the other, with each color in the spectrum radiating out. That idealized sphere is currently impossible to achieve. Computers require strength to create color; no system thus far has been strong enough to fulfill that ideally conceived spectrum. Consequently different computer systems have different "color models"—three dimensional algorithmic diagrams that demonstrate the various spectrums

they can accomplish. The first model from 1996 is a small, strange shape. It sits on the gallery floor like an organic beetle—and though no longer useful or relevant to the sculpture, the originating computer's limit becomes a dominant material characteristic of the sculpture.

The Institute of Critical Zoologists blends fact and fiction to emphasize and expose the idiosyncratic relations and assumptions made between animals, their habitats, and the humans that categorize them. While the result is ecologically minded, the dominant effect is uncanny. The ICZ unearths little understood behavioral habits of animals and re-presents them within gallery settings as representational photography, encyclopedic texts, and multimedia installations. In this particular instance, ICZ painted a circle on the wall. Because of its color, it exists as a different signifier in two languages at once.



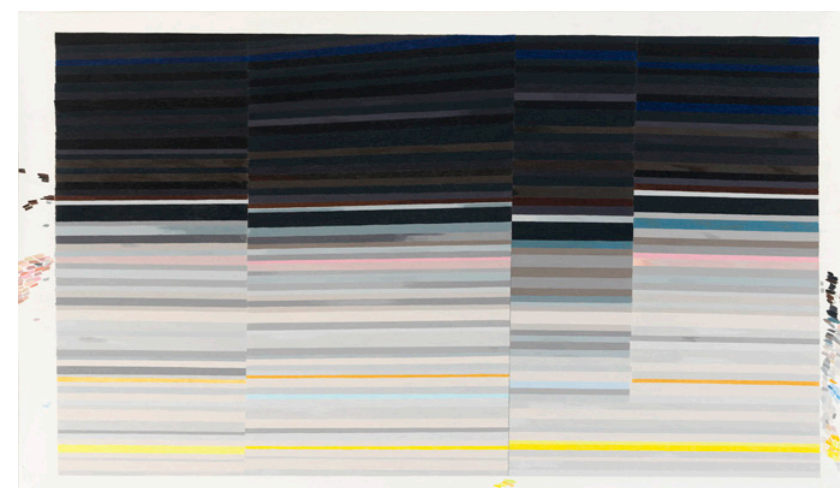
Xaviera Simmons, *Index One, Composition One*, 2011, Color photograph, 50 x 40 in.

For the human it can appear in the gallery as a (perhaps poor) minimalist gesture, derivative of a Richard Tuttle wheat paste, for example. For the bee, it is alluring. It is a place to land, as intoxicating as light to a moth. For a human interested in bees, the circle becomes a bee trap. While the human stands in one worldview, the bee inhabits another. The circle occupies both duplicitously.



Akosua Adoma Owusu, still from *Anancy*, 2012, slide, 2:00 min., from Kwaku Anance, 2013 film 25:00 min., courtesy the artist.

Human attempts to communicate directly with animals never quite work. Milan Metthey goes so far as to try to embody the non-human form. Modifying his posture and wearing a simple costume, he actively courts a mallard. Metthey projects a live feed of himself imitating avian mannerisms to a female duck in another room. Although he is projected in proportion to the duck by way of a live-feed, Metthey cannot capture her interest. Instead of using the animal form to enact Aesopian tales for human benefit, this particular embodiment illustrates Metthey's attempts to



Carrie Gundersdorf, *Four Section of Saturn's Rings*, 2013, colored pencil and watercolor on paper, 46 x 60 in.

conceive an animal mind in order to relate to it personally. Like Mir's letters, he fails; he does not become the heroic protagonist of a transpecies romantic comedy. By way of his attempts, however, he measures his failure in non-human (specifically duck) terms.

In an attempt to experience a horse's perspective, Art Orienté objet collaborator Marion Laval-Jeantet built up a tolerance to horse blood by injecting a small bit of the animal's plasma into her system over the course of a year. She subsequently staged a horse blood transfusion performance with her partner Benoît Mangin. What remains of *Que Cheval Vie en Moi*, is a small, innocuous petri dish with human/horse blood and a video. "In my opinion," Laval-Jeantet said in an email, "my essence was not changed, but I was able to respond to an eternal frustration: I could finally feel Animal Otherness in me, outside of a purely anthro-

pocentric point of view."

Though non-human and inert, Marcus Coates's modest-sized cube of MDF claims to possess an animal otherness, embodying a wolf. *Platonic Spirit: Grey Running Wolf* is entirely un-wolf like. It seems practically featureless, flat on all sides, with right angles, painted the same opaque gray. Everything about it is inorganic, rigid, and manufactured. However easily one may project an image of a running wolf onto its form, the act of projecting the wolf cannot help but be self-conscious. Perhaps this form does indeed contain an ideal—a platonic, geometric, iteration of the wolf, as a Euclidean circle compares to a circle in the world.

In her *Index Four* series, Xaviera Simmons' human figure is overwhelmed by an accumulated collage of material objects staged and orbiting around the torso. A red skirt upturned blooms up like the top of an hour glass. Beneath it hang an assortment of feathers, woven fabrics, black and white photographs, sculptures, shells, vessels and branches over a pair of legs in tights. The nature of these objects, as well as their careful accumulation suggests sentimentality. They could be the signifiers of memory—souvenirs as potent as Art Orienté objet's petri dish. Part linguistic, part material. By occupying liminal spaces between real things and sentimental signifiers, the collage suppresses the body's prominence, illustrating the delicate web of fluctuating material things that comprise not only the environment, but also the individual.

Jenny Kendler appropriates mass-market ceramic representations of birds—popularized icons of animal identity. Kendler modifies these sculptures, creating exquisite

monsters difficult to match to our indexical animal categories. She adds a hexagonal gold cube onto the head of a bird of paradise, and layers wind fallen lichen on a vintage ceramic bird. These new, unnatural creatures seem like the stuff of science fiction. "The Man on the Moone" is a 1638 work of science fiction. Written by an English bishop and published under the pseudonym Domingo Gonsales, the text supplies a first person account of a man who travels to the moon in a chariot drawn by "moon geese." According to the tale, moon geese make annual migrations between the earth and the moon. In *Moon Goose Colony*, Agnes Meyer-Brandis begins with a question: What happened to the moon geese? Did they lose their way and get trapped on the earth? Collaborating with a group of ornithologists in Italy, she worked with the Roman Goose, an endangered species, to condition and breed a lineage of geese that would adapt easily to moon-like conditions.

Sebastian Alvarez presents a cross section of instants in time, describing the actions of humanity in different parts of the earth at different stages. Rather than compress planets into a human frame of reference, Alvarez presents the massive extent of human influence. The diagram is huge, consuming an entire wall of the gallery. Unlike other works in the show, Alvarez's work seems dedicated primarily human action, and yet the earth is present, as is the sky, as are the trees, the implication of air, and even the inanimate materials that will likely outlive any human civilization as the metal of fans and escalators predestined to reenter the non-human environment. Alvarez conveys a single instant occurring on multiple scales and sites at once, leaving the viewer to connect the web of relations between seemingly disparate acts.

In *Anancy* from her 2013 film *Kwaku Anance*, Akosua Adoma Owusu projects a dual-channel film and slides based on the fabled Kwaku Anance, a trickster who appears as both human and spider. While the fable lies at the project's core, the vivid depiction of an estranged daughter fleeing her father's funeral for the woods takes on the greatest poignancy. She leaves her family behind, and goes to the woods in search of something. There she finds ants and men. Of both she asks, "Where is my father?"

Tessa Siddle imagines a new future, beyond scarcity and death. In *The Green Dreams of Wolves*, Siddle was inspired by the fictional direwolves in *Game of Thrones*. Humans wear wolf-derived costumes, as half-hybrids witches, who become ritual sacrifices in what Siddle describes as a "half-natural/half artificial" landscape. As intergendered, transpecies creatures, these characters inhabit multiple worlds at once, understanding the human, the animal, and the embodiment of between-ness. The half-hybrid witches are literate and illiterate, suggesting perhaps that by performance,

they can embody and present new possible futures. In 2007, the Northwest Passage opened up in the Arctic. Scientists continue to predict dramatically rising seas. Bee populations have fallen rapidly, raising questions about food production.



Milan Metthey, *Love Ducking - Experiment 1, Radio-controlled duck*, 2011.

Mice grow human ears on their backs in laboratories and rabbits glow in the dark. In this new age of ecological awareness, the Nature of the Romantics is but a dithering spirit. Rather than succumb to the pang of this loss, *Ghost Nature* exposes the limits of human perspective in the emergent landscape that remains: a slippery network of sometimes-monstrous creatures, plants, and technological advancements.

—Caroline Picard, *Ghost Nature* curator



Tessa Siddle, still from *The Green Dreams of Wolves*, 2013, video, loop, courtesy the artist.

About the Curator

Caroline Picard is a Chicago-based artist, writer, and curator who investigates interspecies borders, how the human relates to its environment, and what possibilities might emerge when upending an anthropocentric worldview. In 2005, she founded the slow-media paperback press, The Green Lantern, releasing debut novels by emerging writers, poetry collections, and art theory publications. In 2009, she published a multidisciplinary reprint of The North Georgia Gazette, an 1821 Arctic humor newspaper written by ice-bound sailors in search of the Northwest Passage. Picard's recent short stories, essays, and comics can be seen, or are forthcoming, in Paper Monument, Rattapallax, Artslant, Art Ltd., The Coming Envelope, MAKE Magazine, and Diner Journal; she has contributed multiple graphic adaptations to the The Graphic Canon project (Seven Stories Press, 2012-15). Other books include Psycho Dream Factory (Holon Press, 2011) and The Chronicles of Fortune (Holon Press, 2011). She is the 2014 Curatorial Resident at La Box in Bourges, France.

A second iteration of Ghost Nature is presented in two parts at La Box, ENSA in Bourges, France.

Projections Animalières is on view
January 16-February 8, 2014;

Ghost Nature is on view there
March 27-April 26, 2014.

Following Non-Human Kinds,
an affiliated symposium is held April 16-18, 2014.