



THE
SUPERNATURAL 210

THE SUPERNATURAL

Jakob Kudsk Steensen (Danish)
Primal Tourism: Tour [still], 2016
Virtual Reality



As images of the post-industrial world transform into the bytes and pixels of the digital age, the sublime is becoming the supernatural. Landscape, once the realm of the bucolic and pastoral, now appears alluring and alarming, fantastical, threatening, and threatened, reflecting the earth's evolution toward an Anthropocene: a planet whose contours and contents will be defined by human activity. This new world may contain hybrid territories, home to hybrid creatures who are the offspring of scientific speculation and artistic fantasy. While hybrids have been a staple of the collective cultural imagination for centuries, images of genetic recombinants populate in particular the art of the turn of 20th century, as do they now. During such periods of significant concurrent economic, technological, and socio-political change, hybrids proliferate, embodying fear and desire, the known and the unknown. They and the territories they may inhabit belong to the uncanny, a place eerily alien and familiar at once. In these still and moving images of land and cityscapes, and in the taxidermy and fabricated figures of *The SuperNatural*, nature meets technoculture, and the new natural is both organic and artificial. Invoking past and

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

"We pack a lot of fear into the landscape right now," observes Chris Doyle, who moves between analog and digital practices, using both watercolor and software-based animation to explore the evolution of nature and artifice. The collapsing buildings and crumbling infrastructure depicted in Doyle's *Apocalypse Management (telling about being one being living)* exemplify the aftermath of massive destruction akin to the natural and human-induced disasters both witnessed and anticipated today. "The particular cause of the devastation is unclear," explains the artist, "but whether natural disaster, act of war, or environmental nightmare, the scenario of wreckage portends a state of emergency for which we are reminded to be ready. The figures in the animation are each lost in the moment when disaster ends and the processes of grieving and rebuilding begin." While the cyclical narrative of *Waste_Generation* suggests the potential for nature to reemerge after the death of industrial manufacture Doyle's nostalgia for the once factory-filled 20th-century American landscape is projected in his animated vision of our journey into the digital era.

Increasingly shaped and perceived through digital code, "the encrypted landscape," Doyle observes, "is a place that contains multiple realities." The enchanted land and light-scapes Albano Afonso conjures belong to the hybrid realm of the daydream: consciously conceived, shaped by imagination, suspended in fantasy yet experienced in lived reality. At first glance, Afonso's *Landscape Crystallizations* read as realistic photographs of dense, jungle-like forest environments. In some areas within the images, saturated color and sharp contrasts between light and shadow give way to exaggerated forms: the flat planes of Cubist geometry emerge among the flora and fauna, the contours of leaves and plants become faceted and reproduce like renderings from digital code—crystallized.

Afonso constructs his landscapes as enigmatic fields of mystery: while titles may denote a geographic source, the images seem suspended in time, severed from the realism of specific time and place. The perforated surfaces seen in his series *Paradises* are overlaid on aluminum, creating reflective portals of light that transport the viewer deeper into a layered, shimmering artifice. The mirrors situate the viewer within the image, while simultaneously enacting a profound displacement—creating a supernatural space akin to what philosopher Michel Foucault calls a heterotopia: “I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space... I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives visibility to myself.”

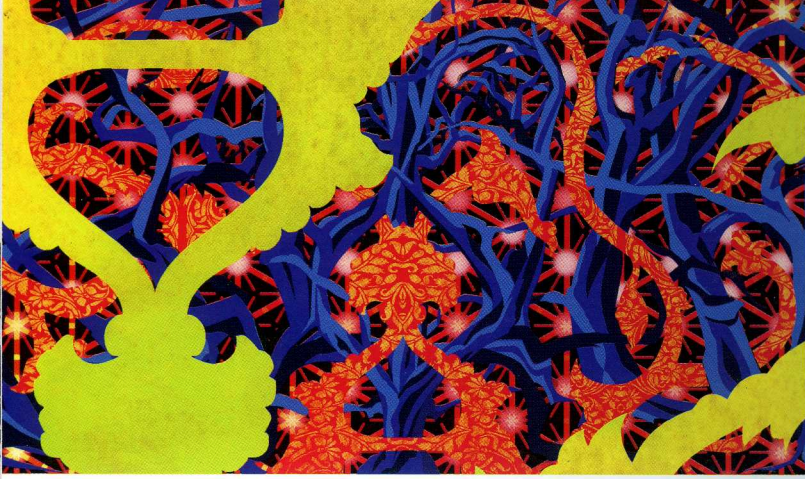
Science as well as imagination inspires Anthony Goicolea, as well as Patricia Piccinini, Laura Ball, Thomas Grünfeld, Sarah Garzoni, Kate Clark, Joshua Haycraft, and others. Cloning, mutations, and other forms of genetic engineering and technical innovation create new life forms here—a fleshy, wide-eyed,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

“Contemporary technology is full of promises and myths,” says Australian artist Patricia Piccinini, “media culture plays on our hopes and desires for technology with a multitude of pledges and assurances.” And yet, neither innovation nor evolution has ever been subject to total control. What if the creations of the technoculture evolve in unexpected ways? Piccinini’s *The Listener* is at once enticing and alarming, its facial expression tender and vulnerable. Curled atop a speaker, the long-haired, doe-eyed creature is presented as if at home—enjoying the

entertainment made possible by technology—the potential source of its own existence. As climate change, environmental damage, human behavior, and scientific experimentation actively affect how and which species will evolve, Piccinini’s work is an inquiry into our relationship with what the future may beget, asking if we would welcome *The Listener* at home: “I am particularly fascinated by the unexpected consequences, the stuff we don’t want but somehow must accommodate. There is no question as to whether there will be undesired outcomes; my interest is in whether we will be able to love them.”

Piccinini’s attitude towards the technoscience she investigate is equivocal—“Just because something is bad doesn’t mean that is not good;” and dreams of becoming animal to gain power or insight, to escape circumstance or self, are pervasive. Figures at play and in conflict sit astride wild animals in Laura Ball’s watercolors; Carlee Fernandez’s costumed play *Bear Studies*, Kate Clark’s fierce antelope-woman whose seductive gaze offers *The Answer to Your Prayers*, and Oleg Dou’s eerie, horned animal children all enact a fantasy of merging the human ego with an animal ID to circumvent or supersede human limitations. British artist Marcus Coates, whose works explore the intersection of nature and mysticism, transforms numerous volunteers from people to birds in his 14-screen video installation, *Dawn Chorus*. Gathering over 500 hours of birdsongs, Coates slowed the recordings down by 16 times, then asked willing choral singers to mimic the resulting chirps whines, and groans, in their own native habitats—their offices, kitchens, bath, living rooms, and more—at daybreak. Videos of these performances were then sped up: the singers, now effectively emanating birdsong, embody the movements and expressions of thrush, warbler, robin, and other avian species to a degree that exceeds emulation and suggests transcendence.

The aesthetics of the digital age fluctuate from dazzling to devastating, charting a cyclical progression beyond what either nature or technology alone may dictate. The combination of beauty and terror that Romantic painters of the 19th century described as sublime has been supplanted by alluring and alarming visions of a planet shaped by human activity. The effects of shifting environmental and economic conditions are documented, imagined, and transformed in works by Pieter Hugo, Luis Gispert, Lars Jan, Edward Burtynsky, Alice Pixley Young, Elena Dorfman, Chris Doyle, and others. Consumerism shapes landscapes both real and imagined: Hugo’s photograph of Agbogbloshie, in Accra, Ghana, says the artist, depicts “the people and landscape of an expansive dump of obsolete technology,” where “the cycles of history and the lifespan of our



Chris Doyle (American)
Circular Lament [still], 2016
Animated video

technology are both clearly apparent in this cemetery of artifacts from the industrialized world,” while Luis Gispert’s *Chanel Jetty* combines the expansive, lakeside vista of Rozel Point, Utah with the interior of a drug dealer’s vehicle outfitted in fake designer fabric. The car’s circular subwoofers visually echo the pattern of Robert Smithson’s iconic land art, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), visible in the foreground. Referencing art history, the mythology of the American West, and consumer consumption, the landscapes of Gispert’s *Decepción* [*Disappointment*] series reveal layers of longing, both material and metaphoric. Created forty years after Smithson laid rocks and silt in the Great Salt Lake, Gispert’s photograph envisions the late land artist’s seminal idea of a “non-site,” which author Heidi Julavits describes as “the collaborative transmission...that results when a geographical landscape moves through or commingles with a figurative, human one.”

A range of emotions—desire, sadness, awe, and more—animates landscape imagery by both Chris Doyle and Elena Dorfman. Dorfman’s *Transmutation 2 (Gold Dome)* is simultaneously a landscape that is real and unreal, created from hundreds of images from the artist’s travels in Albania, digitally stitched together to create an illusion of a unified scene. It was the artist’s fraught familial history with the region that drew her to seek both physical and spiritual connection with nature. “The explosion of *Gold Dome* references a family connection to Orthodox Christianity, once splintered, ultimately resurrected,” the artist explains. “As I traversed the region with my camera I was seeking both a spiritual connection and physical evidence of its savage past.” The layered limbs and shifting patterns in Doyle’s color-saturated *Circular Lament* evokes a forest-like mindscape. A hypnotic, looping vision of complex, constructed space, this “moving painting” distills pattern, color, and imagery into a visual form of poetry that explores how the aesthetic construction of landscape reflects cultural, emotional, and psychological anxieties.

While Lars Jan’s photographic images of human figures commingling with an underwater geography appear fantastical these still images are derived from a public performance he created in which, says the artist, “a totemic aquarium-like sculpture is filled and drained by a custom hydraulic system, capable of flooding the aquarium with twelve tons of water in as little as 45 seconds. The flooding aquarium is inhabited by a rotating cast of performers conducting everyday behaviors — e.g. selling fruit, getting dressed, reading a paper, tuning a guitar — sourced from collaborators across the planet.” Jan titled his multi-media project *Holoscenes*, after the name for our current geologic epoch, the Holocene, which a growing number of experts assert is giving way to the Anthropocene. “*Holoscenes* explains Jan, “weaves the unraveling story of water — the rising seas, melting glaciers, intensifying floods and droughts — into the patterns of the everyday. The ebb and flow of water and resulting transfiguration of human behavior offers an elemental portrait of our collective myopia, persistence, and, for both better and worse, adaptation.”

Jan’s prediction that the “visceral and visual performative collision of the human body and water, born of the concern that as global sea levels rise, flooding and drought will become the central issues of the 21st century,” is also a primary subject of Edward Burtynsky’s photography and Justin Brice Guariglia’s paintings. Shooting from a heightened perspective (often from a helicopter) Burtynsky documents what he defines as “the residual landscape, nature transformed through industry.” Both *Xiaolangdi Dam #2, Yellow River, Henan Province, China* and *Ölfusá River #1, Iceland*, expose the destruction and danger posed to and by a threatened global water supply subject to increasing levels of pollution and diminishing levels of ice, while *Oil Spill #1, REM Forza, Gulf of Mexico, May 11* offers a seductive and stark reminder of the British Petroleum disaster—an image of both the beauty and the ruin wrought by the harvesting of natural resources. Documenting the global evolution toward the Anthropocene Burtynsky says, “I set course to intersect with the great ages of man; from stone, to minerals, to transportation, silicon, and so on...Recycling yards, mine tailings, quarries and refineries, are all places that are outside of our normal experience yet we partake of their output on a daily basis.” Justin Brice Guariglia’s *Öbür 1*, is derived from photographs of agricultural

Albano Afonso (Brazilian)
Paradises (detail), 2012
Photograph on aluminum

land in Asia. Captured from thousands of feet above ground, the artist transforms these landscapes into abstracted forms, distilling the imagery to black lines on a white background. By reducing the images to these essential forms, Guariglia makes visible the impact of commercial development and the resulting, irreversible damage to the land.

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

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



fertilizer. As Moore notes, "both uses demonstrate a conquest of nature, the transformation of subterranean chaos into territorial order, of raw materials into social structure." Dorfman's project delineates the concurrent—and descendent—evolution of capital and its material representation in neoclassical architecture that signaled power and safeguarded hard currency, to the virtual wealth, whose accumulation and exchange, like digital photography, is today manipulated onscreen.

The parallel evolution of economic and ecological conditions in the post-industrial age is the subject of Chris Doyle's *Waste_Generation*. In *Waste_Generation*, the second in Doyle's series of digital animations inspired by 19th-century painter Thomas Cole's allegorical *Course of Empire*, vividly rendered trash heaps and dying factories spewing smoke and dollar bills lay bare the legacy of commercial manufacturing, while scrolls of leaves and rapidly sprouting flora and fauna herald nature's resurgence. "The landscape is completely stylized through design," says the artist "specifically the influence of William Morris and the presentation

of the acanthus, the plant on the dollar bill. I am interested not just in natural elements, but the way we interpret them through design and the way we control the natural world through designing it into submission." The lifecycle of paper currency playing on the screen mirrors the artist's "nostalgia for the moment when our industrialized culture [gave] way to information technology," and yet Doyle's digital course of empire is cyclical, not linear, and generative, rather than apocalyptic.

The dizzying spectacle of Rob Carter's *Metropolis* animates another endless loop of creation and destruction: the evolution of the contemporary urban landscape. Carter's video charts the growth of a composite contemporary city from bucolic farmland to a sprawling tangle of buildings and highways that rapidly disappear and are replaced, their waste generating new cities, over and over, until the built world is buried once more under an uninhabited landscape. Nature's verdant green hues dominate *Mana Curve*, a generative video animation by Tabor Robak in which recognizable shapes and forms of flora and fauna twist and morph into abstractions that transform again into images of artifice both familiar and elusive. To experience one of Robak's *Quantaspectra*, as the artist calls this series, is to discover a brave new world, created by code, characterized by constant change made possible through the algorithmic energy of technology. In these works, as gallerist José Freire notes, "Robak synthesizes two of his practice's previously separate conceptual threads: the acknowledgement and exploration of digital space as a discrete, secondary reality, and the possibility of creating a temporally boundless artwork via programming."

Today technology is increasingly integrated into the environment; computer-generated materials and algorithms are reshaping and redefining "the natural" world. Astrid Krogh's *Meadow* is a woven and layered sculpture of fiber optic strands that glow in a pulsating, changing rainbow of artificial light. Krogh was inspired by the natural colors that arise as daylight changes into night, as seen on the Danish shoreline during the short but sun-drenched Scandinavian summer. The slowly changing hues create a meditative, digital representation of the natural world. Quayola's videos, *Jardins d'Été* and *Pleasant Places*, are inspired by the European landscapes once inhabited and painted by Vincent van Gogh and Claude Monet. Using high resolution 3D scanners to capture the countryside of France, Quayola uses custom software and algorithms to reduce the resulting 3D renderings to 2D colors that move and sway, blur and blend, an investigation into the ways that nature was observed, studied, and arranged by artists in the 19th century and the ways in which technology today "sees" landscape. *Remains #C-003* and *Pleasant Places*

#S006.004 are digitally-derived images made of hundreds of millions of points whose simulation of the landscape presents an aesthetic somewhere between nature and machine. Quayola explains, "Looking at the historic tradition of landscape painting I am intrigued by how Nature as a subject becomes a point of departure to generate new aesthetics and new ways of seeing. I am therefore interested in Nature in a somehow primordial state, untouched, which I observe through highly technological apparatuses...The result in my works are hybrid visions, however not focusing on new ideas of 'hybrid-nature', but on entirely new ways of perceiving something primordial and absolute."

Time and space are fully suspended in Jakob Kudsk Steensen's *Primal Tourism*, a virtual reality artwork in which references to colonialism, tourism, and science fiction intertwine. Viewers embark on a tour of the French Polynesian island of Bora Bora apparently at an undefined period in the future, when the after-effects of human activity remain evident among the lush, dense greenery. A virtuosic combination of fact and fiction, Steensen's landscape is based on actual satellite data and travel journals which anonymous people have shared online. Some imagery is inspired from the logbook of Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen who ventured to the region on behalf of the East West Indian Trading company in 1722. Following Roggeveen's footsteps through Steensen's vision nearly three hundred years later, what may we discover in this shape-shifting realm of the uncanny? The virtual cues Steensen provides provoke a range of visceral responses; a trip through *Primal Tourism* is not just a passive fantasy ride, but an immersive engagement with how we shape and share time and space on the planets we both occupy and imagine.

Alice Gray Stites

Museum Director, Chief Curator

Sources:

Barro, David. "Albano Afonso, Fissures in Perception," catalog essay, *Albano Afonso*, Sao Paulo, Brazil: CasaTriângulo, 2011.

Burtynsky, Edward et al. *Burtynsky: Water*. Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2011.

Doyle, Chris and Patricia Maloney. "Interview with Chris Doyle." *Bad at Sports*, December 5, 2012, http://www.artpractical.com/column/interview_with_chris_doyle/

Haraway, Donna. "Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture's Generations: Taking Care of Unexpected Country," catalog essay, *(tender) creature*, Arava, Spain: Artium Museum, 2007.

Julavits, Heidi. "The Art at the End of the World." *New York Times Magazine* July 7, 2017.

Moore, Kevin. *Elena Dorfman: Empire Falling*. Milan: Damiani/Crump, 2016.

Wilson, Edward O. *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life*. New York: W.W.Norton, 2016.

ABOUT 21c MUSEUM HOTELS

21c Museum is a multi-venue museum located in eight cities. One of the largest contemporary art museums in the U.S., and North America's only collecting museum dedicated solely to art of the 21st century, each property features exhibition space open free of charge to the public, combined with a boutique hotel and chef driven restaurant. It was founded in 2006 by Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson; philanthropists, preservationists, and collectors, committed to expanding access to contemporary art as a means of catalyzing revitalization and civic connection. 21c presents a range of arts programming curated by Museum Director, Chief Curator Alice Gray Stites, including both solo and group exhibitions that reflect the global nature of art today, as well as site-specific, commissioned installations, and a variety of cultural events.

The organization collaborates on arts initiatives with artists and organizations worldwide, including North Carolina Museum of Art, MASS MoCA, Contemporary Art Museum Houston, The Barnes Foundation, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Creative Capital Foundation, Creative Time, and others.

For more information visit 21cMuseumHotels.com

STAY CONNECTED WITH 21c

21cMuseumHotels.com/connect

[Facebook.com/21cMuseumHotels](https://www.facebook.com/21cMuseumHotels)

Twitter: @21cHotels #21cSuperNatural

Instagram: @21cHotels #21cSuperNatural

[Pinterest.com/21cMuseumHotels](https://www.pinterest.com/21cMuseumHotels)

[Youtube.com/21cMuseumHotels](https://www.youtube.com/21cMuseumHotels)

Cc
Lars Jan (Ameri
Persimmons (detail), 2
Archival inkjet |