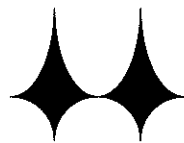


# natured

RICHARD DESCHÊNES   NICOLE DOUCET   ALEXANDER PILIS   SYLVIE READMAN   SUSAN SHANTZ

CURATED BY CLAIRE CHRISTIE & SANDRA GRECSON

Mercer Union



The concept of 'Nature' from poetry I memorized as a child still resurfaces, particularly when I leave the city:

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood..."<sup>1</sup>

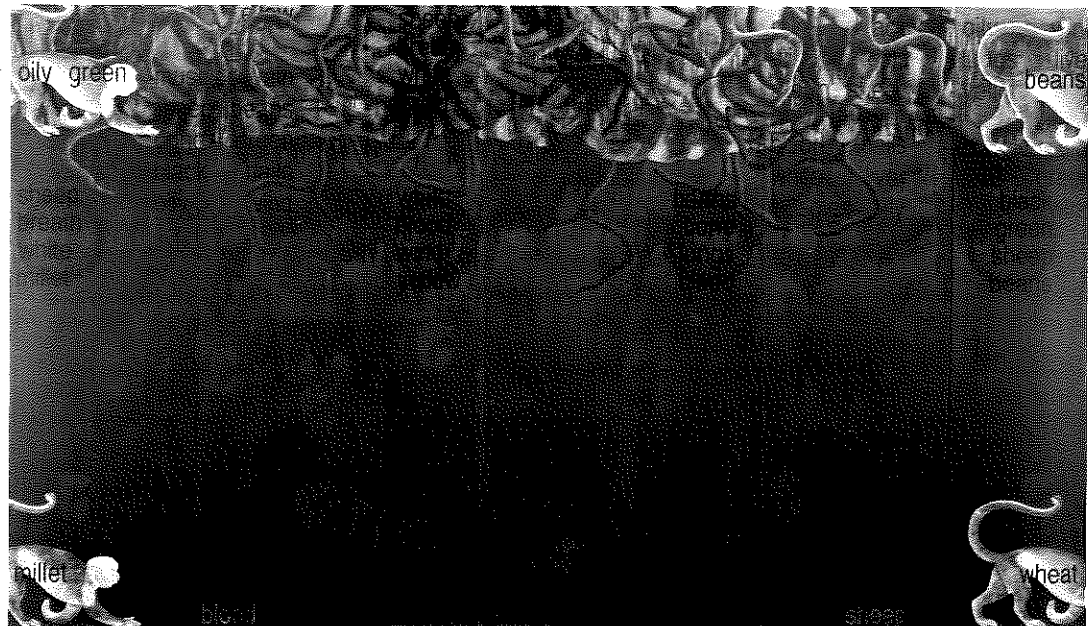
"...Millions of snowflakes out of a windless cloud;  
They covered her close with a beautiful crystal shroud,  
Covered her deep and silent.  
But in the frost of the dawn,  
Up from the life below,  
Rose a column of breath  
Through a tiny cleft in the snow,  
Fragile, delicately drawn,  
Wavering with its own weakness,  
In the wilderness a sign of the spirit,  
Persisting still in the sight of the sun  
Till day was done.  
Then all light was gathered up by the hand of God and hid in His breast,  
Then there was born a silence deeper than silence,  
Then she had rest."<sup>2</sup>

This is nature as physical landscape. Although nature could be threatening, it remains here as positive and uplifting. Ultimately, it serves to transcend the physical realm, to marry the physical and spiritual.

Later I imagined nature as the north, a comforting cushion against the harsh reality of the urban/industrial world and the social violence of the United States. It became nature/culture split; nature remaining safely outside, an innocence apart from the sly craft of culture. This idea began to fail, as the notion that nature itself was failing: whales in the St. Lawrence dying of manufactured toxins present in the water. Nature became closer, entwined in an ecosystem in which humans began to recognize their own presence and doing.

*Words emerge and confident monkeys traverse the dark, dense layers of Richard Deschênes' painting "Map 2". There are no divisions: no horizon, no split between nature and culture. Boundaries are blurred in this 'map', association and identification suggested. Shared organs, shared genes.*

"Biology and evolutionary theory over the last two centuries have simultaneously produced modern organisms as objects of knowledge and reduced the line between humans and animals to a faint trace..."<sup>3</sup>



RICHARD DESCHÊNES  
*Map 2*

PHOTO: André Clément

It was the microscopic examination that identified the toxins in the whales and that is insistently locating nature within us. Impartiality is no longer possible when we can become identified from the coded DNA in our cells.

*Susan Shantz' 'hibernaculum' are body-sized curio cabinets filled with ash, built of ash wood and filled with ash, the residue from burning wood. They are sites of exchange and confusion; what is alive or dead, inside or outside, container or contained, nature or culture, form or substance. They appear empowered with potential.*

(hibernaculum, n. a protective case or covering for wintering, as of an animal or plant bud;) <sup>4</sup>

The shift from viewing nature as landscape to viewing nature in the microscopic image shifts our location and perception. Nature need not be grand and monumental, nor what is outside.

*On the eye in Sylvie Readman's 'Percée', I perceive the reflected image like a crack to glimpse what is inside the child, as if I can pierce the surface of her skin and mind and the photograph itself. The face fragment, almost as large as the accompanying photograph of landscape, becomes itself a landscape. I look at both, reflecting on and projecting what I see to conjoin the body with that which it sees, to consider how we see and what we see.*

(PERCÉE, n.f. 1. Ouverture qui ménage un passage ou donne un point du vue. Ouvrir une percée dans une forêt. V. Chemin, trouée. 2. Action de percer, de rompre les défenses de l'ennemi. Tenter une percée.) <sup>5</sup>

As I consider how to see and what to see, nature does not remain idyllic or outside. It is changing and elusive. As the body has become factored into the relationship, nature has become invasive. We may still consider ourselves as 'colonizers' of nature, or nature as large expanse, but looking through a microscope, it is clear nature is an agent.

*In 'Turbulence', flickering images are emitted from a small t.v. screen. Nicole Doucet has framed the monitor on either side with photographs of gravestones. I see images of carved letters in stone, as if I and the camera seek words to locate the absent body. These photographs are framed by an outer set of photographs: the attempt at communication interrupted as the hand covers the ear, covers the mouth.*

"The 'wholeness' of wordlessness, what is so frequently imaged as fusion with the world (or God, or nature), is one that we cannot live in if, at the same time, we are to be human." <sup>6</sup>

With the body, present in these works by language, manufactured materials, photographs, t.v. monitors, and binoculars, technology has become intertwined with nature.

*Looking through one of Alexander Pilis' pairs of binoculars in 'Parallax Scopic Frame', I am unable to distinguish light or form. Viewing darkness, I question if there is anything there, thus questioning my own location and perception. I imagine that something may suddenly appear, or perhaps I have no access to what may be already there. Another subject is suggested, and with this another system, a different relationship.*

The works in this exhibition do not leave us with a final merging of body with nature. Instead we are presented with a conflicted identity, which simultaneously places us as both subject and object, as nature and viewing ourselves as nature. Placed here we have become 'natured'.

Sandra Gregson

Notes:

1. Robert Frost, cited from memory.
2. Duncan Campbell Scott. "The Forsaken", in *Poets of the Confederation*, ed. Malcolm Ross. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto. 1960. pp. 99 - 100.
3. Donna J. Haraway. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, N.Y. 1991. p. 152.
4. Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary. Dilithium Press, New York. 1989.
5. Micro Robert. *Dictionnaire Le Robert*, Paris. 1971.
6. Jan Zwicky. *Lyric Philosophy*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto. 1992. p. 152.

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