ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:	FAKE PLANTS CAN'T DIE
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Virtual landscapes, artificial reproductions, and digital images increasingly serve as primary references for our understanding of the natural environment, as the "real" environment is rapidly degraded. In *Fake Plants Can't Die*, I ask, and attempt to answer, what it means to have a personal relationship to the natural world in the 21st century.

FAKE PLANTS CAN'T DIE

by

Jill McCarthy Stauffer

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Introduction

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The uncanny has infiltrated the real, and in some sense that boundary is forever compromised.

- Jeff VanderMeer, Hauntings in the Anthropocene

I grew up in what used to be the Everglades. I grew up in a place that was defined by the dominion of man over water. Man-made lakes dot every neighborhood, surrounded by green, watered grass, fed by the grid of canals that keep the former swamp dry. Along the highway, palm trees grow planted in groups of three, sometimes with a croton or bird of paradise mixed in. In between developments, there are dense patches of invasive melaleuca trees, imported from Australia to drain this part of the Everglades[1]. My favorite place to go was a dock in my neighborhood, on an artificial beach, on an artificial lake. There was an artificial duck on the lake, to make it feel more real.

The remaining Everglades were across the highway from my high school, but they were blocked from view by dense highway side rows of the melaleucas that helped drain it. I faintly remember going on a field trip on an airboat once, but that was the extent of my exposure to the renowned

[1] Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Weed alert Melaleuca (Melaleuca quinquenervia). Accessed on April 28, 2025. https://myfwc.com/media/3226/invasiveplants-melaleuca.pdf

ecosystem that bordered my own city. It wasn't just me - I don't know anyone who went to the Everglades more than once or twice, usually on a field trip, usually on the same airboat. Evidence of our proximity came in the occasional ashfall when the Everglades were seasonally on fire. We couldn't see the Everglades, but we could smell it. The Everglades may as well have been another world, one that had nothing to do with Pembroke Pines, Florida.

When I moved to Vermont for college, I walked with some friends through the woods down to Otter Creek. Canadian geese were floating on the river, stopping for refreshments on their journey south for the winter. The geese on the river reminded me of the artificial duck I grew up seeing on the artificial lake. The imitation was the primary reference.

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The simulacrum is never what hides the truth - it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true.

- *Ecclesiastes*

- Jean Baudrillard, *Precession of the Simulacra*

Growing up in the specific, hyper artificial environment I was raised in, I dreamed about a "true" nature that I imagined existed beyond the confines of Broward County, Florida. But even my ideas about what "true" nature was were built out of artificial references. The first time I went to

the Smoky Mountains, I considered how much they reminded me of Splash Mountain in Disneyworld. When I first visited a marsh, I thought of Route 119 from the world map of the Pokémon Ruby video game. The Everglades were fifteen minutes from my house, but Route 119 was what I associated with wetlands. I had simply been to Route 119 more often.

When I had the opportunity to leave South Florida, I did, in part, to find the "true" wilderness that I believed existed elsewhere. I decided to immerse myself in a landscape that felt completely opposite to Broward County - rural Vermont.

When I visited Vermont for the first time, I planned to drive there with my aunt who lived in Concord, New Hampshire. To cross state lines from New Hampshire to Vermont, you drive over a bridge spanning the Connecticut River. To this day, every time I cross the bridge it feels as if I am crossing a threshold into another world. The change in the landscape is immediate. Where there are billboards, fast casual chains, and urban growth on the New Hampshire side of the river, there is uninterrupted forest on the Vermont side.

As we continued our journey, we drove along Route 89, which meanders through the Green Mountain National Forest, following the journey of White River. The drive alone was one of the most beautiful landscapes I had ever seen. This, surely, was true wilderness.

I later learned my conceptions of Vermont's landscape were far from the reality of its history. By the end of the 1800's, 80% of Vermont was deforested[2]. The "Green Mountains" were largely logged and used for extensive sheep farming. The landscape I saw as the epitome of "true nature" was devastated, then replanted by man less than 100 years prior.

Many spaces that I perceived as "natural" have a similar story to Vermont. Shenandoah National Park was used for farming as well, formed in the 1930's after government displacement and purchase of 3,000 individual small farms[3].

The artificiality of a landscape feigning pristine wilderness is still far closer to true nature than say, a landscaped green lawn in what used to be the Everglades, or even worse, a low-resolution digital replication of a marsh for the Gameboy Advance. These parks offer valuable public access to natural landscapes, and necessary ecosystems for the plants and animals that live there. But I can't shake the dread of what it means to live in a world where even the most pristine spaces are shaped, even at the cellular level, by human impact. What was true "wilderness" like before wide scale human intervention? Would anyone alive even remember? Did it ever really exist?

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[2] Mark Bushnell, "Then Again: When the Green Mountains were not so green," VT Digger, July 15, 2018, https://vtdigger.org/2018/07/15/green-mountains-not-green/

[3] Audrey J. Horning, "When Past is Present : Archaeology of the Displaced in Shenandoah National Park," National Park Service, Updated on October 25, 2022, https://www.nps.gov/shen/learn/historyculture/displaced.htm

III

Rather than creating escapism, mapping elements of the Anthropocene via weird fiction may create a greater and more visceral understanding (render more visible)—precisely because so many of the effects of this era are felt in and under the skin, as well as in the subconscious (whether manifesting as a denial of civilization's death or in a more personal manner).

- Jeff VanderMeer, *Hauntings in the Anthropocene*

When I first began the project of this thesis, I was interested in communicating my growing unease that nothing is truly "natural" - that all life, even the most remote, has been impacted by human creation. Conceptually, I was inspired by the New Weird movement in fiction writing, as exemplified by the Southern Reach Trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer. According to Jim Greene, the New Weird is characterized by "elements of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, primarily set against urban backdrops featuring heightened realism. Emerging in the 1980s and gaining prominence in the 1990s and 2000s, New Weird takes its name from earlier movements, particularly the Old Weird... Unlike its predecessor, which typically reflected anxieties about technology and societal change, New Weird embraces the strange and fantastical elements of its stories, often using them to critique contemporary realities."[4]

While the New Weird is a contemporary literary movement, the concept of using the uncanny, fantastic, and strange to critique societal issues (such as climate change and climate anxiety, in

[4] Jim Greene, "New Weird (literary movement)," EBSCO, 2023, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/literature-and-writing/new-weird-literary-movement.

this instance) is in line with my aesthetic, conceptual, and material concerns as an artist. The New Weird provides an appropriate framework for beginning to explore my thoughts on artifice, degradation, and simulations as related to the environment.

Can installation art and sculpture successfully capture the anxiety of climate change, via the uncanny, as New Weird literature does? What is the potential for an embodied experience of the New Weird? I needed to undertake extensive material research to begin answering this question. I first attempted to adorn real plant limbs with iridescent vinyl leaves and photographs. However, in my initial tests of this construction, I made quick discoveries. Namely, that the dried, dead plant branches were too delicate to handle at the thin stems where leaves would naturally attach. Secondly, most adhesives I tested would simply not bind the artificial vinyl to the real wood in a long lasting, sturdy way. Aesthetically, the two also would not mix - in the proximity of the real, the artificial looked remarkably silly, an obvious sticker on something more noble.

I quickly decided that while incorporating both artificial and natural elements was necessary to share the concept of the work, these materials could not directly exist together. They would create individual ecosystems in the installation - The Real and The Artificial - as distinct experiences that stood in juxtaposition to each other, divided by a curtain.

Figure 1- Stauffer, Jill. *Fake Plants Can't Die,* installed in the UMD Art Gallery.

Figure 2 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail from *Fake Plants Can't Die.*

The Real

I

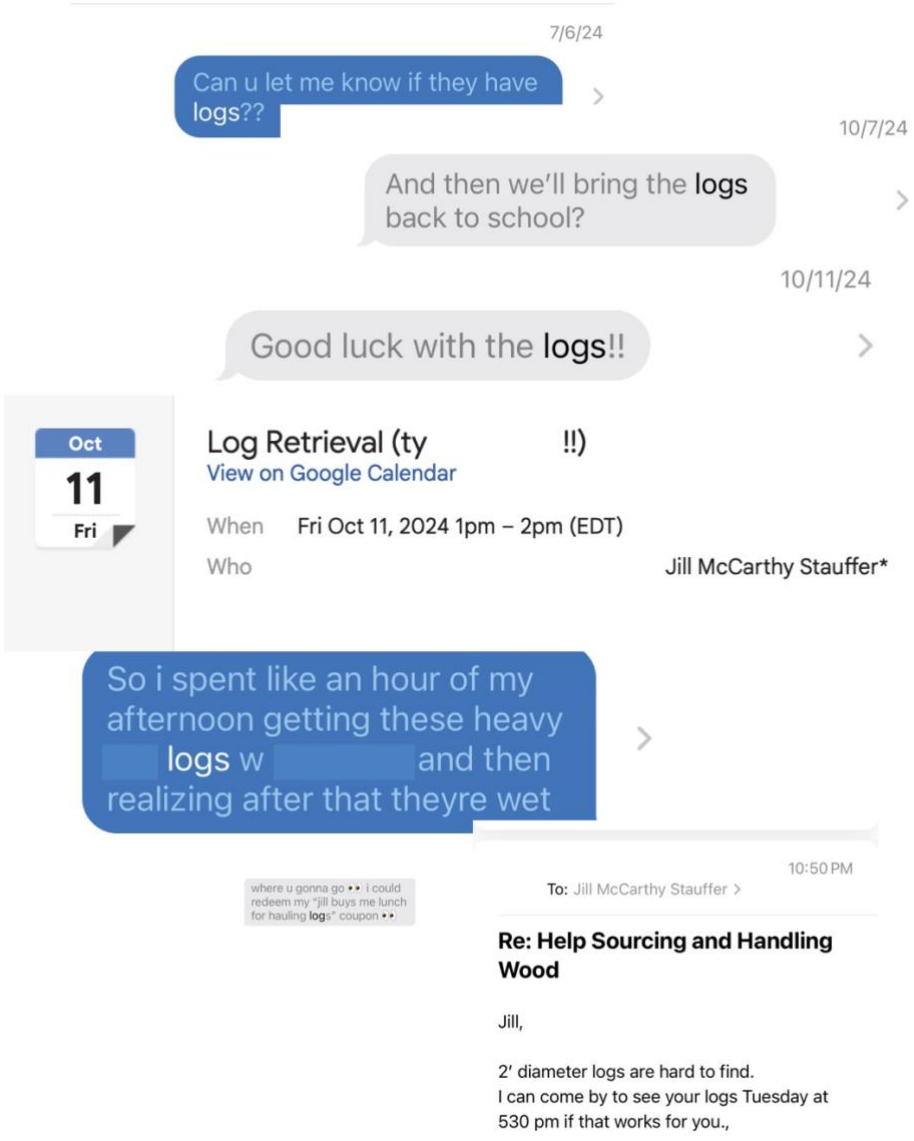

Figure 3- Stauffer, Jill. Screenshots of text messages about finding and retrieving logs.

In order to enter the installation, the viewer must pass through “The Real”. I originally wanted The Real to be made of entirely found, local elements, ideally located from the nearby Guilford Woods that I was using as a visual and audio reference for the manipulated elements of the work (more on this in The Artificial).

I found some decomposing logs in the Guilford Woods, a half mile walk away from my studio. The logs were beautiful - soft wood rotted out to create organic tubes, holes created patterns on the bark from where beetles had burrowed into the wood, and mushrooms of different colors bloomed on their surface.

A friend of mine helped me move the logs into my studio, where I quickly discovered multiple problems with the help of a peer more experienced with wood. Once I took off the gloves I used to move the logs, I realized that despite a week of no rain, they were wet. Wood apparently can take months to dry, which is facilitated by a kiln drying process. The mushrooms I thought were beautiful became dangerous in an enclosed space. Unknown spores, some of which may be harmful to humans, could be growing and spreading on the logs, directly infiltrating the air I breathe. Despite evicting many beetles during the transport, I also did not consider the presence of much smaller insects, even the microscopic. I quickly disposed of the logs and felt the invisible itch of imagined mites on my skin for days.

I still wanted to use locally sourced wood, but I needed to find freshly chopped wood (green wood) that would have a lower likelihood of decomposition, bugs, and mold. I ventured into the depths of Facebook Marketplace.

II

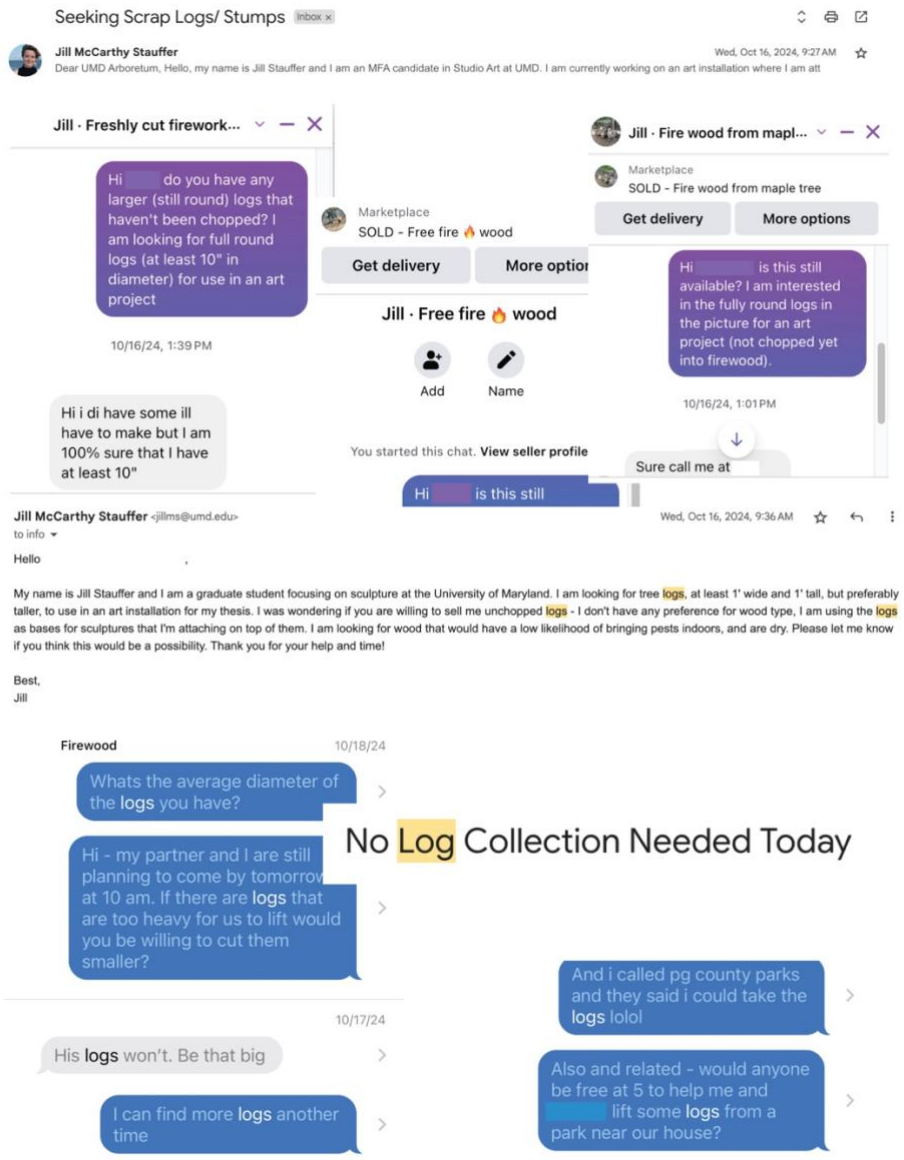

Figure 4 - Stauffer, Jill. Screenshots of text messages about finding and retrieving logs.

The next few weeks consisted of multiple outreach attempts to random men selling wood on the internet, emails to area firewood companies, and even a meeting in a forest with the University of Maryland's head arborist in my quest to find logs to construct The Real environment. It seemed that even my attempt to procure "real nature" was mediated by digital interfaces - a photo of a log next to a tool for scale on Facebook, a text message for follow up questions, an email with a plea.

I ended up finding the perfect logs through pure coincidence. I was running in a park near my house when I saw a fresh tree cut down. I called the Prince George's County Parks department and asked if I could take the fresh tree logs. They were confused, but they said yes.

III

Figure 5- Stauffer, Jill. Screenshots of text messages about running into mold problems with the logs.

I thought that obtaining large, greenwood logs would be the hardest part of constructing The Real environment. I was wrong. The hardest part was keeping them from wanting to do what nature called them to do - decompose. In order to avoid the buggy mess of my first attempt to bring logs into the studio, I wrapped all the logs in plastic bags. Although these logs felt dry (freshly cut, with no rain while they were outside) I failed to consider the logs' own nature. The moisture level of fresh greenwood varies between species, but begins at 30%[5], which means that all greenwood contains a significant amount of moisture. In bagging my fresh greenwood and

[5] Charles David Ray, Ph.D, "Calculating the Green Weight of Wood Species," PennState Extension, March 8, 2023, https://extension.psu.edu/calculating-the-green-weight-of-wood-species#section-0.

containing that moisture, I accidentally created the perfect environment for mold to grow. I discovered in time to have a surface level mold problem, which I scrubbed with vinegar and sealed with greenwood log sealer (recommendation courtesy of UMD's head arborist). Months later, I still find ants in my studio.

Real environments are messy. Real environments decompose, and grow mold, and provide homes to bugs, and fall apart. Real plants, even dead ones, take time, knowledge, and patience to maintain in man-made spaces, like a studio or an art gallery. I did not have that knowledge. I'm sure someone did once, but it was not passed down to me.

In addition to the logs, I wanted pine straw to create a natural forest floor in The Real ecosystem. Acquiring the dried pine straw was much simpler - I ordered it online.

Figure 6 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can't Die*.

Figure 7 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can't Die.*

Figure 8 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can't Die*.

Figure 9 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can't Die.*

The Artificial

I

FEJKA artificial potted plants don't require a green thumb. Perfect when you have better things to do than water plants and pick up dead leaves. You'll have everyone fooled because they look so lifelike.

- FEJKA, Ikea. Advertisement

One of the best things about our artificial olive tree is how easy it is to care for. You'll never have to worry about watering it, trimming it, or dealing with any of the other hassles that come with real plants. Instead, you can simply enjoy the beauty of nature without all the work.

- 7 ft. Artificial Olive Tree, Home Depot, Advertisement

You and your guests will never be able to tell the difference between our fake floor plants and a real one. They are already the perfect size, and you never have to repot, trim or water them.

- Artificial 47 in. Fiddle Leaf Indoor and Outdoor Plants, Home Depot, Advertisement

The fake plant is meticulously designed to mimic the intricate details of natural trees the natural patterns of the trunk and leaves are faithfully reproduced, complete with moss-covered surfaces on the potting soil the lush green foliage and lifelike texture make it nearly impossible to distinguish these artificial trees from real ones, both in appearance and touch.

- 6 ft. Artificial Fiddle Leaf Fig Tree, Home Depot, Advertisement

On the other side of the curtain, an artificial ecosystem blooms. I set out to create organic, tree-like forms after learning that directly adhering artificial materials to real wood did not produce the results I envisioned. After considering multiple material options for construction, it occurred to me that what I was looking for already exists in fake plants.

Fake plants are marketed as the absolution of care. The fake plant is immortal, it lives forever. A fake plant can't tell you that you have not cared for it properly - a fake plant can't wilt. But the fake plant will never perk back up after a period of drought. It will never show the evidence of love given, of care provided, of water poured. Once made, the fake plant can exist without giving, or receiving, or with any dependency. A fake plant is made necessary by a society that does not give us time to provide labor out of love, and where we are always tired and need convenience. A fake plant is an easy solution to the hard problem of trying to keep something alive, which a capitalist society does not give us time to do.

II

I had the unsettling thought that the natural world around me had become a kind of camouflage.

- Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation*

This past November, I took a trip to Easton, Maryland for the 2024 Waterfowl Festival. The emphasis of the festival is both on the preservation of the waterfowl, and on hunting them, as many environmental efforts tend to be. It is in a hunter's best interest to be an environmentalist. You can not kill something that doesn't exist anymore.

Within the festival is a veritable array of imitation. Hand carved wooden duck decoys are auctioned off for astronomical prices. The decoys serve as bait for the ducks while hunting - the real duck being duped by the fake duck. The most prized decoys are the ones which have been most meticulously crafted to imitate a waterfowl. A craft that would take years of close observation of the waterfowl to produce, a craft which will usher in the death of its muse.

We walked past a high school where the World Waterfowl Calling Championship was being held. Competitors used callers, a small woodwind instrument, which is manipulated through breath and movement to create hyper realistic waterfowl sounds. The idea is that wild waterfowl will hear the friendly sounds, from what they believe are other waterfowl, and come closer. The World Waterfowl Calling Championship reminds me how imitation is often a trap. How a replication is often a lure.

The artificial plants in The Artificial ecosystem have leaves made of photographs of the Guilford Woods with iridescent underbellies. The leaves show images of the woods in late summer - the leaves are green and lush. Now, almost eight months later, all those leaves are dead. They have fallen and begun the slow process of rejoining the fabric of the forest floor, becoming fresh food for the new life blooming this spring. On the other side of the curtain, the shadows of the Artificial plants and leaves produce a lifelike shadow, a silhouette of a vibrant living forest. Surrounded by the dead debris, smells, and sounds of the woods, the Artificial invites you past

the curtain to the promise of a pristine wilderness. The leaves are a camouflage, and the Artificial is a trap.

III

What do I believe manifested? Think of it as a thorn, perhaps, a long, thick thorn so large it is buried deep in the side of the world. Injecting itself into the world. Emanating from this giant thorn is an endless, perhaps automatic, need to assimilate and to mimic… It creates out of our ecosystem a new world, whose processes and aims are utterly alien - one that works through supreme acts of mirroring, and by remaining hidden in so many other ways, all without surrendering the foundations of its otherness as it becomes what it encounters.

- Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation*

The highest point of elevation in Broward County, Florida, is in Vista View Park, at just 65 ft above sea level. About a twenty-minute drive from my childhood home, the park consists of a central mound, dotted with tennis courts and playgrounds. My earliest memory of the park is driving to the top of the mound with my parents after dropping my older sister off at her first sleepover. From the peak, my parents could point to the exact house we had just dropped my sister off at in a nearby subdevelopment. In a county where the average elevation is six feet above sea level, 65 feet feels like a bird's eye view.

The first time I skipped school with friends, we ended the day at Vista View Park. We rolled down the mound, getting covered in grass seeds and bumps and mosquito bites. We stayed out

late in deep conversation, looking out over our hometown spread before us. A wide green expanse, with nothing but the wide sky above. The freedom around us, and within us, growing.

Vista View Park is built over what used to be a superfund site, the Davie Landfill. The Davie Landfill was built in 1964, and continued operations as a landfill and later, sludge lagoon, until 1987 when clean up operations began as prompted by the EPA[6]. The landfill was officially closed in 1995, and reopened as Vista View Park in 2003, just a year before I moved to Pembroke Pines as a child. It took poisoning ourselves to make us want to make the Davie Landfill into Vista View Park, into a place once again fit for human life.

When my friends and I rolled in the grass, we were rolling on grass that grew over a massive mound of trash. We were rolling over a site that formerly produced toxic sludge, that had poisoned groundwater, that had poisoned the people who lived near it. But we loved it anyway. It loved us anyway.

The "islands" in my installation are miniature Vista View Parks. Polystyrene layers create the volumes, stacked atop shaped plywood boards. The designs for the layers were inspired by topographical maps, each layer a concentric, organic shape that builds upon other layers to create a mound. On top of the polystyrene are natural materials - newsprint papier mâché glued to the

[6] Environmental Protections Agency, *Reuse and Benefit to Community Davie Landfill Superfund Site*, January 10, 2014, https://semspub.epa.gov/work/04/11121288.pdf

foam using a cornstarch slurry. I layered the newsprint until the machine rendered layers of the foam fell away into something soft and organic. I used paper pulp to add a natural texture to the mounds. From the other side of the curtain, they look like mounds of soil. From behind the curtain, they are glittering, man-made masses, with a toxic core.

Figure 10 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can't Die.*

Figure 11 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can't Die.*

Figure 12 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can't Die.*

Figure 13 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can't Die.*

Figure 14 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can't Die.*

The Curtain

Socrates: And now allow me to draw a comparison in order to understand the effect of learning (or the lack thereof) upon our nature. Imagine that there are people living in a cave deep underground. The cavern has a mouth that opens to the light above, and a passage exists from this all the way down to the people. They have lived here from infancy, with their legs and necks bound in chains. They cannot move. All they can do is stare directly forward, as the chains stop them from turning their heads around. Imagine that far above and behind them blazes a great fire. Between this fire and the captives, a low partition is erected along a path, something like puppeteers use to conceal themselves during their shows.

Glaukon: I can picture it.

Socrates: Look and you will also see other people carrying objects back and forth along the partition, things of every kind: images of people and animals, carved in stone and wood and other materials. Some of these other people speak, while others remain silent.

Glaukon: A bizarre situation for some unusual captives.

Socrates: So we are! Now, tell me if you suppose it's possible that these captives ever saw anything of themselves or one another, other than the shadows flitting across the cavern wall before them?

Glaukon: Certainly not, for they are restrained, all their lives, with their heads facing forward only.

Socrates: And that would be just as true for the objects moving to and fro behind them?

Glaukon: Certainly.

- Plato, *The Allegory of the Cave*

Figure 15 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can't Die*

Figure 16 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can't Die*

The Sound

To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending.

- Jean Baudrillard, *Precession of the Simulacra*

The other day, I was on my porch listening to the birds during one of the first warm days of spring. I heard the most unusual chirping - distinct songs, one after another, but with the same volume and direction. I used the Merlin app, designed by CornellLab, to record the bird songs on my iPhone. The application uses an AI trained by birders to identify birds by best matching recordings to an expansive database of bird sounds. The app was designed for amateur birders like me who want to know what bird they're hearing, who don't have the knowledge to identify the birds on sound alone.

The app quickly told me that there was a Northern Mockingbird. I looked up at a tree on my left where I heard the sound and sure enough, a greyish brown bird was perched on top. The app then lit up with a cacophony of birds. Blue Jays. cardinals, house sparrows, American robins… and a belted kingfisher? I had never seen a belted kingfisher in my neighborhood before, in fact I had only seen one ever by a local river. Expert fishermen, kingfishers tend to stay by water. My house is at least half a mile from the closest source of water.

I looked for the robins, blue jays, sparrows, and cardinals the app identified as well. Not only could I not see them, but every time the sound pinged on my recording, it sounded like it was coming from the same place. The mockingbird.

Mockingbirds are such successful imitators that even the most advanced ornithology AI cannot distinguish between the imitations of a mockingbird and the real thing[7]. There were no cardinals, blue jays, sparrows, or belted kingfishers - the mockingbird just knew all their songs. A quick Google search revealed that this is a common problem among users of the app, and developers are stumped on how to actually fix the problem to avoid invalid data.

The AI cannot outsmart the mockingbird. The AI cannot replace what seasoned birders know. But I also wouldn't even know the bird I saw was a mockingbird without it, or that it was imitating calls rather than cycling through its own species' songs. It would still be nameless to me - just a bird.

Unifying all components of the installation, The Real, The Curtain, and The Artificial, is a soundscape designed by the sound designer Leo Grierson (University of Maryland, TDPS MFA

[7] Barbara Kalta and Andrew Gregory, "Mocking Bird (Mimus polyglottos) calls potentially confound acoustic indices of bird diversity and provide a potential heuristic to distinguish them", *microPublication Biology*, 10.17912/micropub.biology.001148.

‘25). I commissioned Leo to score the installation to create an audio landscape that mirrors and enhances the installation I fabricated. The base audio files are my recordings from the Merlin app, taken over a span of two years in various woods within a mile radius of my studio. Each recording is evidence of an inquiry - of my own questions about the natural world that I looked to a digital interface to answer. Leo modified the recordings with interruptions of the unnatural - an error sound, the ding of a text message, the whir of an engine. These sounds also exist in these woods - the chirp of a bird and the chirp of the notification alert aurally side by side, sometimes indistinguishable. As you move through the installation, the “real” sounds of my recordings give way to these technological interruptions as the viewer moves from The Real into The Artificial.

Figure 17 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can’t Die.*

Conclusion

I

Nature held me close and seemed to find no fault with me.

— Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*

In 2020, I stopped going to Church. I also started spending a lot more time outside. During the early months of COVID, I worked remotely every day, then drove to the nearby Trustom Pond National Wildlife Refuge. Once a farm, Trustom Pond is the only undeveloped salt pond in the state of Rhode Island[8]. The early months of the pandemic, springtime, corresponded with the best season for birding in the region, when the birds have begun to travel but the trees are still bare for high visibility. I began to amble through the woods listening for birds, walking slowly to avoid scaring off any animals. I saw wild turkeys, herds of deer, squirrels, chipmunks, jays, swallows, cardinals, red winged blackbirds. I trained my eyes to identify an osprey from a hawk, a mussel shell from a clam shell, ironweed from milkweed. I learned the names of the creatures and plants around me, and they became more precious to me in turn.

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[8] U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Wildlife Refuge System. *Trail Map - Trustom Pond National Wildlife Refuge*. Accessed April 27, 2025. https://www.fws.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Trustom%20Pond%20NWR%20Trail%20Map.pdf

At the end of the trail is an elevated deck overlooking the pond, an intertidal strip of seashore, and then the ocean. Each day I saw the ocean keep breathing, and I knew that I could too.

On that deck, immersed in the pale light of early spring in New England, and surrounded by the noise of the gentle waves of the pond and its visiting birds, I felt God as I hadn't in the Church since I was young. I felt inextricably linked to the natural world around me, but also deeply free. I saw God in the trees, in the birds, in the sun, and also in myself. Nature holds me close.

II

The things that haunt us in this age are often the things we care about or have some connection to, no matter how slight, and if they are also the things that matter we either need to become cynics or hedonists and change the things we care about so we don't care when they're destroyed, so the hauntings cannot affect us . . . or, more bravely and with more effort, let them haunt us even if it is painful, and through that haunting find some kind of act or sense of the truth that is meaningful. No matter how large. No matter how small. All while the hyperobject I am trying to pin down looms over me and shines through me and is all places and in all ways is shining out and looming over.

- Jeff VanderMeer, *Hauntings in the Anthropocene*

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I am in one of the first generations of people whose bodies have become transformed by plastic. There is growing evidence to suggest that microplastics are found in all parts of the body[9]. Scientists still do not know what the long-term effects of this presence will have on human

[9] Bridget Balch, "Microplastics Are inside Us All. What Does That Mean for Our Health?," AAMC, Accessed on June 27, 2024., https://www.aamc.org/news/microplastics-are-inside-us-all-what-does-mean-our-health.

health. We do know that microplastics are already in breast milk and sperm, that emerging scientific research has found microplastics in placentas and the bodies of newborn babies[10].

The great sin of this thesis is that in the creation of it, I used plastics. I needed artificial materials to demonstrate the concept, to produce the "New Weird" I hoped to create, but there is no absolving the real impact these materials have. Written fiction can achieve an image or a feeling through printed words alone. In order to garner the same feeling through visual art, material production is necessary, with material waste as an inevitable byproduct. Is there any way to ethically create environmental art, if it results in contributing to the very problem it critiques? I don't know. I expect to spend the rest of my artistic practice trying to answer this question.

But the materials in this installation also feel honest. No environment is plastic free. My body is not plastic free. When I die, the microplastics in my body will remain unchanged, becoming ingrained in a new host on a cellular level, immortal. The materials of my thesis installation are a reflection of this transformation occurring in the world, and in my own body. After a year spent breathing in the steam of hot wire cut polystyrene, the soft fume of vinyl under a heat gun, and the smoke of freshly melted solder, this aspect of the work will remain within me, too.

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[10] Ragusa, Antonio, Alessandro Svelato, Criselda Santacroce, Piera Catalano, Valentina Notarstefano, Oliana Carnevali, Fabrizio Papa, et al, "Plasticenta: First Evidence of Microplastics in Human Placenta," *Environment International* 146 (January 2021), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2020.106274.

III

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

- Robert Frost, *Birches*

As I compile all I've gathered and created to install my thesis, I realize that the natural materials are still transforming. Condensation still builds underneath the logs, prompting the growth of mold and mushroom communities. Moss and lichen still adorn the bark, somehow still green. And beneath the pine needles, large black ants crawl around my studio, somehow still alive after months indoors. The dead natural materials have yielded new life, despite my best efforts to prevent it.

Perhaps the real division is not between the “real” and the “artificial” but between the “mortal” and the “immortal”. The death of the logs is necessary to produce new life.

The fake plants will never change, but they also cannot create. I cannot understand myself in the artificial landscape I have created, nor in any artificial landscape, because I am, like all living things, of transformation.

My body will decompose one day and become recycled into the organic fabric of the earth. I love the natural world because it teaches me how to love my own mortality, and to love that which is mortal around me. Artificial environments cannot teach us these lessons, because fake plants can’t die.

Figure 18 - Stauffer, Jill. Detail of *Fake Plants Can’t Die.*

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