



Lucas Foglia, *Alex's Magnolia Leaf Rain Hat*, North Carolina, 2007, archival inkjet print, 23.5" x 30"

of Nature

Comer Photography Collection
curated by Twyla Nova

March 27 – April 24, 2015
O'Donnell Arts and Technology Building, Gallery

The human relationship with nature is both physical and metaphysical. As our viewpoints and perceptions of our place in the natural world evolve, the photograph continues to provide us with a contemplative medium of expression. The exhibition *of Nature* presents an overview of the works of photographers who derive inspiration from the natural world. Whether it is through an emphasis on portraying scientific phenomena, rendering flora and fauna, constructing tableaux, or documenting sustainable lifestyles, these artists use the power of observation to explore our relationship with the earth.

Image-makers informed by philosophical thought, political engagement, scientific advances, and theoretical frameworks within our visual culture often embrace the subject of nature. Artists approach the theme with an appreciation of the earth's beauty and intrigue as well as an awareness of the increasing fragility of the environment and the detrimental effects of our actions including deforestation, habitat loss, water, soil, and air pollution, global warming, and the extinction of species, both plant and animal. As environmental issues become prominent concerns, many artists find themselves using art to promote and express not only a desire for action but also their sense of personal responsibility for the earth. Incited by their appreciation and awareness artists serve as mediators between nature and culture.

In the 19th century, Edmund Burke and John Ruskin offered the literary concept of the sublime, which included picturesque and beautiful representations of nature, a notion still associated with the visual aesthetics of the landscape. Since the 19th century, however, there has been



Tom Chambers, Prom Gown #3, 2005/2007, archival pigment print, 10"x10 "



John Pfahl, Bethlehem #25, 1988, chromogenic print, 10"x 10 "

an ongoing aesthetic movement portraying humanity and nature as separate (Hirsch 294-298). With the expansion of the West and rise of industrialization, many image-makers turned toward the landscape as a means to express reverence for endangered ecosystems (Rosenblum 144). Photographers such as Ansel Adams presented wilderness without humans or even evidence of their encroachment, to encourage the preservation of the natural world. These photographs portray untainted and unpopulated scenery that so many of us have come to associate with the term landscape (Hirsch 294-298). William Neill's work depicts the pristine beauty of untouched wilderness, relying on our emotional response and perception of the image to remind us of what we must value and conserve. His images glorify the awe-inspiring natural world seemingly untouched by humankind. Neill is aware of the danger of portraying separation between nature and humanity. He stated:

Photographing wild landscapes, depicting an image of pristine beauty, absent of the intrusions of man, is a dangerous proposition bordering on creating a false mythology. Yet wild places do still exist. What little is left will be lost if we don't develop a new and enlightened stewardship of our earth where Nature and Man are not considered separately. (Neill)

His image *Rock formations and twilight surf, Garapatta State Beach, Big Sur, California* exemplifies the aesthetic pursuit of a transcendental depiction of nature. The subject of the landscape includes three dark monumental rocks in the ocean surf at twilight with smaller rocks lining the foreground. Neill's use of long exposure to blur the motion of the sky and water creates a seductive melting of magenta, violet, and blue hues surrounding the rocks. The majestic quality of the photograph communicates Neill's spiritual experience in nature. He stated: "Perhaps the only way the world will change is for people to go through some kind of a profound aesthetic experience that makes us aware that we are personally accountable for our actions and how we affect the environment" (Neill). His images offer a glimpse of how wondrous the natural world can be while also reminding us of the importance of preserving these seemingly untouched areas.

In contrast to the established tradition of landscape photographs representing wilderness as untouched by humans, John Pfahl's images are a reminder that our presence inevitably reshapes the natural landscape (Brower 83, Johnson 262). Pfahl has dedicated his photographic career to creating pictures that comment on human intervention in the natural world, which started with his series *Altered Landscapes* during the 1970s. Pfahl's photograph *Bethlehem #25* from the series *Smoke* depicts two smoke stacks billowing fluffy pink and orange hues of cloudlike exhaust against a soft blue grey sky at the Bethlehem Steel coke ovens in Lackawanna, New York. At the time of the creation of the series, these particular smoke stacks emitted 1.4 million tons of the carcinogen benzene a year. Pfahl's images convey both repulsion and intrigue through the enormity of the visual aesthetics and the environmental impact of the steel coke ovens.

Tom Chambers's tableaux images reach his viewers on both a conscious and an subconscious level, encouraging them to reexamination their actions, particularly those that affect the environment negatively. Chambers's images from his series *Rite of Passage*, express our vulnerability in the wilderness while demonstrating how our coexistence with nature creates tension, thus reminding us of the fragility of the natural world. Addressing dilemmas such as global warming, climate change, and habitat loss through surreal photomontages, Chambers provokes an emotional response to environmental issues (Chambers 45). *Prom Gown #3* depicts an adolescent girl dressed in a flowing pink

party dress. She is alone, and her delicate clothing is incapable of shielding her from the elements, leaving her vulnerable to the wilderness, splayed like an offering to the earth on a pedestal of thin branches. This feeble construction supporting her weight appears hastily assembled by the human hand. Her innocence and vulnerability seem to represent the naivety of our human actions, which weaken the very ecosystems, on which we depend for survival.

While contemporary artists often explore environmental concerns through tableaux imagery, other artists represent the natural world by photographing Earth's flora and fauna out of their usual context, thus creating a visual comparison that inspires an emotional connection to the subjects. Kate Breakey's photograph *Cyanocitta Cristaio*, from the series *Small Deaths*, depicts a deceased fledgling blue jay, its beak wide open as if crying out. Breakey attempts to understand and reveal the natural world's simultaneous cruelty and beauty, which marks all life on Earth. She considers these images of perished creatures a final kindness to them. Through her photographic "shrines" she examines these mysterious creatures and creates fantasies where these animals exist in an "imaginary afterlife" (Breakey). These images are testaments to the deep human desire many of us feel to nurture and protect the animal kingdom.

Like the work of Breakey, Camille Solyagua's photographs eloquently capture her subjects as specimens, isolating them in order to celebrate their beauty (Sobieszek 7). Solyagua's image *Flying Bird #15* from the series *Birds* represents her manifestation of a visual narrative that contemplates the delicate, intertwined, and complex phenomena of the natural world (Solyagua). The slow shutter speed creates a blurred motion against the open sky, which accentuates the beauty of the bird's flight. The photograph offers a perspective of the bird unachievable by the human eye and serves as a reminder of the temporal qualities of life.

Wildlife photographs often depict animals that we would not normally see in our daily routines, providing a substitution for an authentic experience in nature (Brower 89). Laszlo Layton's reproductions of taxidermic forms emulate zoology and natural history illustrations, thus becoming unusual tributes to the natural world, as they are farther removed from wildlife than a straightforward photograph. Layton's image *Untitled* from his series *Pictorial Zoology* depicts a deceased mammal, now a taxidermal specimen, set against a white background and experienced as a photographic illustration. He photographed using a view camera and produces contact prints using the cyanotype process, which he then hand-painted to emulate the look of 19th-century natural history drawings (Layton). The painted cyanotypes serve no scientific function, but they encompass elements of art and science. His photographs of mounted animals, some of which are already extinct, remind us of the importance of protecting and preserving vulnerable life forms. As the number of endangered species increases, all that may remain of many of these creatures is inauthentic versions in the form of photographs and taxidermic specimens.

Science facilitates our understanding and appreciation of the natural world and has had ties with photography since the emergence of the process. Since its invention, photography has prevailed as a tool of both the arts and the sciences and often both simultaneously (Wilder 8). In the early 1800s botanist, Anna Atkins used the camera-less photographic printing process known as the cyanotype to render the likeness of flora specimens she collected for her reference book *British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*. Science can seek and explain questions as well as challenge our beliefs regarding the natural world. The sciences utilize photography to document specimens, to record experiments, and to detect and measure phenomena not visible to the human eye; such photography in turn inspires the imagery of many artists.

John Chervinsky is both a scientist and an artist, working as an engineer in the field of physics and creating photographs inspired by his technical background. His series *An Experiment in Perspective* is a collection of whimsical science demonstrations and physics experiments. Although not intended to be factual or instructional representations, the images reference the "ongoing philosophical debates" of the sciences

Camille Solyagua, *Flying Birds #15*, 1992, gelatin silver, 3.5" x 6"



Neill, William, 1991/2000, *Rock formations and twilight surf*, Garapatta State Beach, Big Sur, California, Lightjet Crystal Archive color print, 7" x 9"



as well as the difficulty in asking scientific questions not easily answered (Chervinsky). His photograph *The Analysis* depicts a cut white calla lily clamped within a white grid, providing a framework for examination and experimentation. Emblematic of the gift of Mother Nature, the white calla lily also symbolizes purity, ephemeral life and beauty, as well as female fertility (Impelluso 74, 85). These attributes revere fragility in human nature and directly oppose our inorganic industrial achievements. However, as environmental concerns escalate, many of us look to the research and innovations of the sciences for solutions.

Just as modern-day innovations can cause feelings of disconnect between humans and the natural world, these technologies may also offer advancements that allow us to live in harmony with nature. Lucas Foglia's series *A Natural Order* documents people throughout the southeastern United States who live off the grid, divorcing themselves from traditional public utility services, including water supplies, sewers, natural gas, and electrical power grids. Motivated by environmental concerns, some of the individuals in Foglia's photographs have left cities and suburbs in order to live more sustainable lifestyles. They build with local materials, utilize nearby springs for water, and obtain their food by hunting, gathering, and farming. While living a seemingly archaic lifestyle, these people remain integrated within contemporary society through solar panels, batteries, cell phones, and computers (Foglia). These technologies provide them with modernized conveniences while still allowing them to live off the land and create a smaller ecological footprint. *Alex's Magnolia Leaf Rain Hat, North Carolina* depicts a young man with long hair nonchalantly standing with several leaves atop his head, which obscure his face from the viewer. The man appears one with the natural world, standing shirtless with his arms crossed and dirt caked under his fingernails. He is adorned only with his hat of leaves to ward off the impending rain, and his ease may cause us to wonder if there are advantages to this more environmentally sustainable lifestyle he has chosen. Perhaps we have surrounded ourselves with so many conveniences of modern technology that we overlook the simple pleasures the natural world has to offer us.

Photographers' inspiration derived from nature manifests through many artistic forms. As humans, we are physically dependent on the earth but our understanding and connection to nature are intellectual, spiritual, and in constant progression. Artists find themselves creating images as mediators for these complex ideas. Ranging from landscape and wildlife to tableaux and documentary, the photographic motifs included in *Nature* display a variety of means to express concepts regarding the natural world. The exhibition demonstrates our admiration of, concern for, and wonder at the earth and serves as a testament to our need to continually reaffirm our place within the realm of nature in an ever-advancing world.

Works Cited

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Artist Lecture: "A Natural Order" by Lucas Foglia, Photographer

Tuesday, March 31 at 7:30 pm
JSOM Davidson Auditorium, 1.118

Reception: 6 – 7 pm, O'Donnell ATEC Building, Gallery

Curator Lecture: Twyla Nova

Thursday, April 2 at 2 pm
JSOM Davidson Auditorium, 1.118

Reception: 3:30 – 4:30 pm, O'Donnell ATEC Building, Gallery



Gallery Hours: Mon. – Sat., 9 a.m. – 9 p.m.,
Closed Sunday

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