



NATURE AS PROTOTYPE



NOVEMBER 9 — DECEMBER 23, 2017





Adam Nelson, *Doomsday Seed*,
steel, foam and concrete

INTRODUCTION

I am gratified that the McLean Project for the Arts was able to provide the time and space for the exhibit *Nature as Prototype* to germinate and grow. The joint brainchild of artist Elsabe Johnson Dixon and art historian Betsy Johnson, the exhibit brings sculptors Adam Nelson and Grethe Witrock together with composer Yoko K., to create an immersive experience of both sight and sound. Presented in our Bullock|Hitt Gallery on Chain Bridge Road in downtown McLean, Virginia, the converted storefront space provides just the right atmosphere for this endeavor. The simplicity of the gallery configuration and the spaciousness of the setting allows viewers to respond to each sculpture individually, on its own terms as a complete work of art, while also experiencing the mysterious transformative synergy created by their proximity to one another. Yoko K's textural soundscape, samplings of sounds both created and drawn from the natural world, provides the aural ingredient that ties the works together.

While each artist made their work on their own, the curators created a sense of community by gathering everyone together pre-installation so they could see each others work and exchange ideas around the curatorial concept. Connection was fostered between the art and the artists. This, coupled with an atmosphere of relaxed openness and experimentation during the installation process, helped create an exhibition that is fluid, strong, cohesive and holistic, making the gallery a place to spend time and where that time is well spent.

Nancy Sausser
Exhibitions Director
McLean Project for the Arts

NATURE AS PROTOTYPE

The term “prototype” in relation to nature, has been defined in Eleanor Rosch’s study “Natural Categories” (1973) as the central part of a category that one thing that other things in a category are measured against; a comprehensive idea instead of an “ideal” representation. Everything in the category of nature is, in part, a lesser or greater representation of the prototype. So referring to nature as a prototype raises questions around how we conceive of nature today. Does it only consist of pure natural matter? Or does the category now include the illusion of natural matter? What about social commentary on ecology? Can that be considered within the category of Nature?

Prototype theory is a mode of graded categorization in cognitive science where some things within a category are more central than others. According to Rosch’s research conducted at the University of California, Berkeley, basic natural or illusionary natural objects provide the most identifiable prototypes. The objects represented in *Nature as Prototype* give us a deep recognition and perception of the environments and paradigms that we hold up as models, allowing us to understand our relationship to what we see and experience. The language of these objects recall water, geographical formations, and maps, some of the earliest categories sorted and named by children. Retaining these natural categories sets the path for the most coded, and most necessary in language, and allows the viewer to navigate water and land while listening to the wind. Visual and sensory systems have been harnessed in this exhibition to explore the meaning of nature today through the concept of prototype as a means for understanding the most important elements in a category.

The “Prototype Nature” symposium, held at the Folkwang University in Germany in December 2015, discussed nature in

relationship to the prototype as an initial conversation about the diversity engagement with nature. The goal of the symposium was to find ways in which information provided by engineering processes and design templates could be harnessed to help us face the challenges of today’s complex natural world. For instance, how can art coexist with nature, industry, and technology? The symposium concluded that research fields dealing with the utilization of nature should pursue interdisciplinary approaches.

The show *Nature as Prototype* aims to follow this recommendation by encouraging the discourse of a wide range of disciplines, taking into account the diverse motives, goals and insights that the selected artists might bring to the newly renovated Chain Bridge gallery space at McLean Project for the Arts. The three artists Adam Nelson, Grethe Wittrock, and Yoko K. were brought together to engage in an interdisciplinary collaboration of sound and form to establish a cohesive and comprehensive investigation that describes the possibilities of nature. Each artist will contribute their personal knowledge and their technical know-how of diverse disciplines to the gallery space in a dialogue about nature.

Artist Adam Nelson, who builds underwater environments for the Baltimore Aquarium (with the requirement that they be water tight for 15 years) brings not only an in-depth knowledge of materials, but also the scientific research that he has conducted in observation and imitation of aquatic environments to this interdisciplinary collaboration. Nelson’s observation of the public’s reactions while standing in spaces at the aquarium that have been altered to imitate the natural world, contributes an understanding of how sensory perceptions can be seduced into a suspension of disbelief, to the conversation. While working at the intersection of public spaces, architectural illusions, and faux-natural scenes that evoke

sensory responses, Nelson has created a natural prototype steeped in the artificial, which offers a tactile experience of the real.

Yoko K’s experience redesigning sound installations for hospitals, combined with her knowledge of human sensory stress limitations, weaves into the conversation of *Nature as Prototype* at McLean Project for the Arts, a layered understanding of auditory tolerance and viewer reactions to sound. She chooses pitch and tone to infuse her sound compositions with relational elements that interpret the environment within the gallery.

Danish born artist Grethe Wittrock works with a delicate tracing and perforation patterns that remind viewers of maps, signs, and systems used in ancient navigation codes as well as digital systems like HyperLedger Fabric Chains and nodes, bringing in a historical as well as philosophical conversation about ancient and post-modern codes.

Each of these artists uses nature as a platform for their own scientific and historical research and to observe not only the material histories of their objects but also the social sciences in the humanities that inform their installations. These artists do not only design and engineer objects but they enable the viewer to respond personally to illusion, sound and mapping and code systems.

Elsabe Johnson Dixon
Curator

Betsy Johnson
Curator



Grethe Wittrock, *Greenland Landscape* (detail), sailcloth



Adam Nelson, *Quasi*, digital print, thermoform plastic, steel



Yoko K., photo credit Louis Pickney

GRETHE WITTRICK

Grethe Wittrock's reflections on a fragile eco-system is rooted in her Danish heritage and transformed with experiences of her global travels. She probes codes within the shifting place of human society and our rapidly changing world. Used ship sails that Wittrock sourced from Danish yachtsmen reveal their distinct histories; each mark made by a windswept past guides her cut, painted and perforated surfaces. Each industrially woven sail surface resembles geological maps and remnants of ancient mariners codes as well as digital systems like HyperLedger Fabric Chains and nodes.

She works both aesthetically and aurally within her compositions of hand perforated large-scale patterning. While the fabric acts as a filter, absorbing sound waves, light permeates through the openings and creates a reflective field.

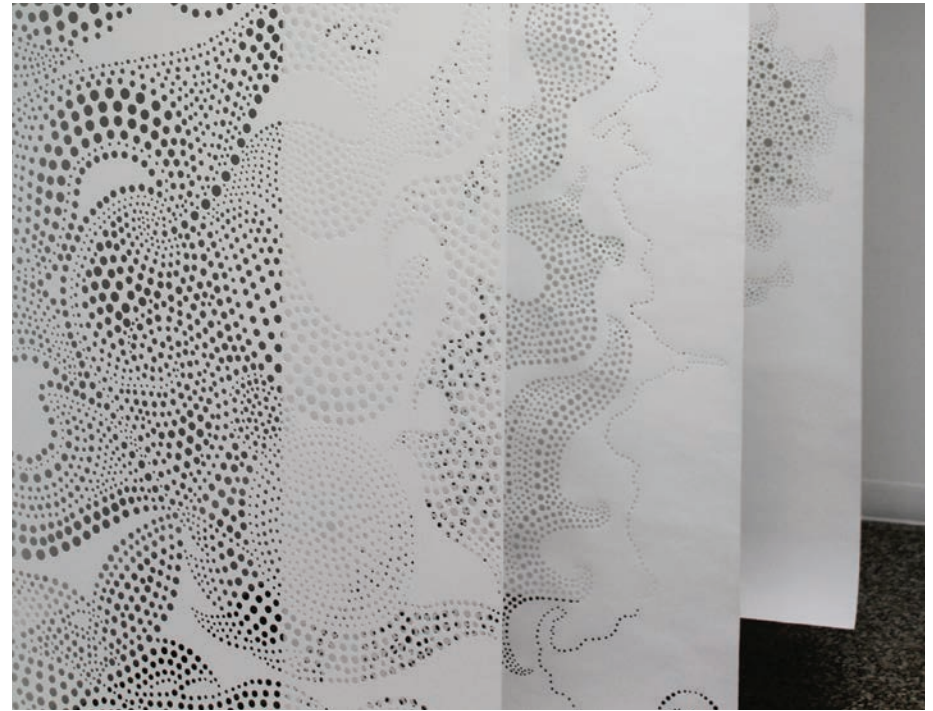
These sails reveal traces, showing the power of nature that interacted with the sail, but also incorporates an imagined interpretation of nature's transformative imprint in imagination and the imagination of power in nature. While historically drawing on the maritime and craft traditions of her native country of Denmark she uses sailcloth as her medium, which she marks, cuts, and perforates. This ancient utilitarian textile that served in all sorts of wind and weather conditions, hold stories of voyages, water, and maps, revealing familiar topographical outlines, nautical signs and imagined forms.

Wittrock's design and weaving background is evident in the way in which she prioritizes both material and form, pushing the sculptural possibilities while respecting the raw materials original history and

authentic energy. With great sensitivity Wittrock carefully perforated holes onto a surface that will not tolerate mistakes. Much as a sailor respectfully navigates the different weather, tide and water conditions, Wittrock navigates her canvases, considering the formal elements as well as the spacial-dialogues the material has with light, contextual references of aerial photography as well as traditional mark making along with nautical signage. Her work comments on the interconnectedness of geographical mapping, aerial-scapes, and nautical signage, that all offer guidance to the traveler. Wittrock draws on her experiences studying in Japan at the Seika University in Kyoto and to the work she did pertaining to the Japanese painter Tohaku Hasegawa who has had a direct influence on her color sensibility and use of screen-printing as well as mark making. Her work probes the boundaries and historical provenance of the material from which they are made. There is a visual clarity to be found in Wittrock's sculptural installations, which are infused with a poetic juxtaposition of time, place and context. Present in her objects are an overwhelming stillness and harmony, but also the uncanny awareness of precarious boundaries. Her work draws attention to the need for navigational sensors within the post contemporary natural eco contexts. Nature clearly draws out the points of limitations and Wittrock marks them with an imagined mapped surface.



Grethe Wittrock, *Migrating Birds* (detail), sailcloth



Grethe Wittrock, *Ocean Life, Familiar Shores, Uncharted Land* (detail) sailcloth perforated by hand



Above: Grethe Wittrock, *The Blue Whale*, sailcloth, screen printed and cut by hand

Left: Grethe Wittrock, *The Black Swan*, weather-beaten sailcloth, dyed and cut by hand



Installation View, *Nature as Prototype*: Grethe Wittrock, *White Swan* (detail); Adam Nelson, *Lava Delta Belief System*



Installation view, *Nature as Prototype*



Installation View, *Nature as Prototype*: Grethe Wittrock, *The Black Swan*; Adam Nelson, *Doomsday Seed*

ADAM NELSON

For Adam Nelson, nature provides not only the prototype for the form and content of his work but also for the feeling that he is chasing in his studio. He is constantly searching for the moment where he is at a “high risk point with everything,” gambling with the physical parameters of his materials and processes without knowing what his outcome will be. He explains that in these moments he is “trying to capture that experience of being at the precipice and recreate it in the gallery.”

The physical objects that Nelson creates are meant to be disorienting and cause viewers to question what they are looking at. He sources his images online, seeking out birds-eye views of landscapes that are difficult to read, lack compositional hierarchy, and vacillate between abstraction and representation. He chooses to use photographs taken by people he does not know, of places that he has never been, in an attempt to remove his personal experience from the equation and locate a more global view of the earth. In his pursuit to make “objects of unknown origin,” he then fractures and remixes these images in a complex layering of textures and perspectives.



Adam Nelson, *Glacial* (detail)

Focused on understanding what our contemporary landscape is and how we treat it, Nelson allows his material choices to be dictated by what is gifted to him, what he can reuse, and what is easily recyclable. Working with foam, plaster, and thermoformed plastic for this exhibition, he has created works that waver between translucent sheets that reflect and refract light as if underwater, and opaque, textural masses that summon an aesthetic akin to a crackled and broken desert floor.

In his own words, textures found in nature “clash and bump up against one another” in his work, “flowing but kind of rippling and busting apart.” In essence, he is placing us there next to him on that precipice, experiencing the conflicts, eruptions, and sublime beauty that result from the vast diversity of nature.



Above: Adam Nelson, *Lava Delta Belief System*, digital print, thermoform plastic, steel



Right: Adam Nelson, *Doomsday Seed* (detail)



Adam Nelson, *La Brea Expansion Plan*, digital print, thermoform plastic, plaster, steel



YOKO K.

Yoko K. is a composer who relates her practice to that of an anthropologist: she goes into the field to gather information through conversations with people and after internalizing the data she collects she enters a creative space where she focuses on side-stepping her ego, a process she refers to as “getting out of my own way.” Having learned to take cues from extreme situations in order to locate the root of something meaningful, Yoko recently completed a project where she asked people to identify the sounds that they wish to hear at the end of their life. Overwhelmingly, the responses she received spoke of water and the ocean so there was a pleasing synchronicity when she learned that Adam Nelson and Grethe Wittrock had gravitated toward an exploration of water within the context of this exhibition.

For Yoko, the motif of water is not just about soothing sounds, but is instead wrapped up in a primordial human connection to the landscape. As such, it has a direct impact on the work that Yoko is doing to ease the experience of sickness and death by redesigning the soundscape of hospitals. Working so closely with industry and design, Yoko has come to recognize the fundamental importance of protecting research and creative problem solving that is not directed at predetermined outcomes. Linguistically, she is drawn to the way that designers use the term prototype as an excuse to be creative, avoid judgment, and allow more fluidity to enter their process. Thus, her contribution to *Nature as Prototype* is a project driven by passion, mixing samples from the hospital with ocean sounds collected by bioacoustician, Dr. Erica Staaterman and cello sounds from D.C.-based cellist Janel Leppin. According to Yoko, her sound is not meant to “add too much color or subtract anything from the viewer’s experience but, rather, to be one with it.”



Yoko K.

SARAH BETH OPPENHEIM



Sarah Beth Oppenheim always begins her creative process with a space that inspires her as if it were calling for movement to activate it. She most frequently finds herself drawn to small spaces where she can imagine immediacy between the performer and the audience. She is interested in exploring how viewers retain the ability to choose what and how they see despite the pathways and sightlines that are predetermined by architecture. In the context of *Nature as Prototype*, Oppenheim will have an additional factor to consider in the immersive environment created by Yoko K., Adam Nelson, and Grethe Wittrock. Enticed by the many layers of the installation, Oppenheim will choreograph a site-specific dance in response that exposes the raw edges of its making, focusing as much on what is absent as it does on what is present. Developed over the course of the exhibition, Oppenheim’s work will be performed in the space toward the closing date of the show.

BIOGRAPHIES

Adam Nelson’s art practice examines the way complex materials affect our environment and culture. His sculptures and installations focus on the synthetic materials humanity creates and how they are becoming our new nature, new environment, and new reality. Adam studied Interdisciplinary Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art and Studio Art at the University of Maryland. Adam has multiple public art installations permanently installed at various institutions around the state of Maryland. He is currently Senior Habitat Fabrication Specialist at the National Aquarium, Instructor of Sculpture at Anne Arundel Community College, and proud resident of Baltimore City, Maryland.

Yoko K. is an ambient electronic musician, producer, engineer, and vocalist. Yoko’s sound, “Organic Electronica,” is a hybrid of analog and digital that an audience member once described as “listening to a dream.” Yoko has received numerous awards, including the Washington Area Music Association Award for “Best Electronica Artist” (2011, 2012), and a number of grants and fellowships from Washington, D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities. Yoko is also a fellow at Halcyon Incubator as the founder of Sen Sound, a social enterprise with the vision to transform the sound environment in hospitals. She has served as an artist-in-residence at Johns Hopkins/Sibley Innovation Hub, Stanford MedicineX, NextLOOK at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, Saga Artist Residency (Iceland) and Strathmore, and performed at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Guggenheim Museum, Grace Cathedral, and Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Grethe Wittrock is one of Denmark’s most talented and internationally renowned fiber artists. Currently working in Washington, D.C., she has previously studied printmaking at Kyoto Seika University, College of Fine Art in Japan and is a graduate of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Her works have been exhibited throughout the world, and she has won numerous international awards, including multiple grants from the Danish Art Foundation. Grethe recently completed a Halcyon Arts Lab Fellowship in Washington, D.C.

Sarah Beth Oppenheim hails from the golden California fields of cowgirls and Cannery Row. She earned her BFA at SUNY Purchase, her MFA at University of Maryland, and she is currently working as a community organizer, comic book editor, and documentary consultant for 120 Project — a social justice arts activism platform that uses dance, comics, and dialogue as a premise for community building (120Project.com). Her company Heart Stück Bernie makes site-specific performance art with exposed seams and a highbrow/lowbrow zeitgeist cocktail.

Elsabé Johnson Dixon is an artist, educator and social engagement project manager for The LIVING HIVE. As Vice President of the Washington Sculptors Group she has worked with MPA, GRACE, Smith Center for the Arts, VisArts, the Hillyer, and numerous other local galleries as well as agricultural centers to establish art-ecology programming for Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia sculptors. Within her own practice Dixon works with live organisms and is deeply engaged with environment and eco platforms. As curatorial assistant to Helen Frederick for the International exhibition *BreakthroughArt*, Dixon engaged in educational programming with the Newseum in Washington, D.C., the Aspen Institute, CO, the University of Texas San Antonio Art Gallery, TX, the First Amendment Center in Nashville, TN, and the US Equity Realty Exhibition in Chicago, IL. Dixon has most recently worked with British curator Leah Gordon editing the 2016 catalogue for the Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince Haiti and writes for the *East City Paper* in Washington, D.C.

Betsy Johnson is a curatorial assistant at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. where she has worked on exhibitions such as Robert Irwin: All the Rules Will Change, Ragnar Kjartansson, and Mark Bradford: Pickett's Charge. She is ABD in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at the University of Maryland and has curated exhibitions locally for the Washington Project for the Arts, the Arlington Arts Center, Metro Micro Gallery, and The Art Gallery at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Image, far right: Grethe Wittrock, Arctic Fjords, weather-beaten sailcloth, screen print perforated by hand



MCLEAN PROJECT FOR THE ARTS

Mission

The mission of McLean Project for the Arts is to exhibit the work of emerging and established artists from the mid-Atlantic region; to promote public awareness and understanding of the concepts of contemporary art; and to offer instruction and education in the visual arts.

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