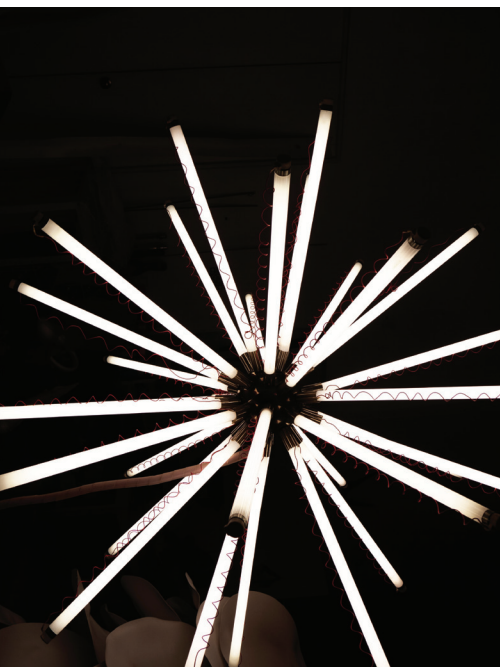


Sicardi Gallery

Mirando la Flor



Melanie Smith, *Matto Clark*, 2010.
Digital Impression on cotton paper, 43x31in.



Thomas Glasford, *Aster 140 TB/4100 K (Red)*, 2003.
Fluorescent light, nickel plated brass, orange wire, red wire, electrical hardware, 55in diameter.



Maria Fernanda Cardoso, Untitled from the series, *Woven Water*,
Submarine Landscape Oreatus Nodulosus, 2015.
Starfish and metal, Variable dimensions.

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Maria Fernanda Cardoso
Thomas Glassford
Gabriel de la Mora
Oscar Muñoz
Miguel Angel Ríos
Miguel Ángel Rojas
Melanie Smith

March 10 to
April 23, 2016

Mirando la Flor

*Emergimos del mar
cuando aún éramos piedra
partimos las aguas
nos hicimos puente
ombligo fuimos
cintura de piedra
cintura de tierra
cintura de selva
emergimos del mar
como un puño que reclama
emergimos de la tierra
como un puño que florece
así nos hicimos camino
entre el corazón
y el tiempo. ...*

*We rose up from the sea
when we were still stone
we parted the waters
we made a bridge
we were the navel
belted by stone
belted by land
belted by jungle
we rose up from the sea
like a fist that takes back
we rose up from the land
like a fist that flowers
like this we made a path
between the heart
and the time. ...*

Julio Serrano Echeverría

Thomas Glassford's *Aster* is an industrial exploding star. Look too long and its after-image will burn beneath your eyelids, leaving a persistent, haunting impression.

In 1836, U.S. transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote an appeal for a more direct and immediate relationship to the world around us: "The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?"¹

And yet, at the start of the 21st century, we find ourselves surrounded by technologies that distance us even further from the world around us. Even our immediate surroundings blur to a fog behind our ubiquitous screens and responsive gadgets. It's easy to miss the changing circumstances. Our memory is fractured, our attention divided, our days measured by email and texts and screens. We have a web platform to organize our friendships. The neon lights of the *Aster* proffer a new nature, one that burns and glows.

Simplicity and complexity, mortality, mutability and adaptation, entropy, futility and unpredictability are among the things that nature can teach us. The lessons change as we change.

Mirando la flor draws its name from an installation by Colombian artist Miguel Ángel Rojas, which includes two photographs and a video (1997-2007). In the first photograph, a young man lies on the ground, looking at a flower, apparently stoned. In the photograph to the right, the same man is shown the first photograph. Now, his scarred and gaunt body lies on a barren ground, and he stares at the photograph of a distant past. Between them, the soundless video twitches sporadically as he talks about

his life; he seems jumpy. The scene moves as it might in a drug-induced high. It's an awful confrontation with the past, and a candid realization of the present. But what does it mean for him to look at the flower, and does it bring him any solace?

"We are thus assisted by natural objects in the expression of particular meanings," Emerson writes. "...the memorable words of history and the proverbs of nations consist usually of a natural fact, selected as a picture or parable of a moral truth."² Indeed, *dichos*, proverbs and sayings are often weighted with natural metaphors, which we understand symbolically. "Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch. A lamb is innocence; a snake is subtle spite; flowers express to us the delicate affections. Light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance; and heat for love. Visible distance behind and before us, is respectively our image of memory and hope."³

Maria Fernanda Cardoso's *Woven Water, Submarine Landscape* series (2015) transports its viewer to a watery, imagined world. Hinged together delicately, the starfish she collected during a residency in San Francisco cast layers of shadows on the wall behind them. Cardoso had worked with found animal specimens before this project, but with *Woven Water*, she discovered an unexpected economy. The starfish sold to tourists in San Francisco were nearly all harvested and preserved in China before being shipped to the U.S. In the process, they were transformed from a living thing to a body-as-commodity. Further, the history of their harvesting (and scarcity) was erased by San Francisco's tourism industry: they became

a symbol of another place than the one from which they came.

In Cardoso's work, the science of animal and plant life underscores the ways in which our own social and sexual behaviors are based in biological design. Her resin *Intromittent organ* sculptures (2008-2009) enlarge the male external sexual organs of a species of insect found in the caves of Tasmania. "By dislocating natural specimens from their habitat, and displaying them in purpose built environments called museums, we transform them," Cardoso writes. "The animals become 'specimens' in their transition from what we call 'nature' to what we think of as [human] 'culture.'"⁴ A group of prints made in 2004 and 2010 arrange insects into what we identify as gardens or trees. The adaptations that camouflage the insects from predators transform them, in the viewer's eye, to plants. There is a fluidity in how we see the natural world, and that fluidity is a biological innovation.

Nature reflects back to us our own best and worst impulses. It responds to our actions. It indicates important truths about us and our priorities. Our relationship to it is dynamic: that is to say, it acts and reacts, responds and creates new situations. There is a reciprocity between us, even if we prefer to think that we are in control.

Our descriptions of the world around us may say more about how we organize that world than they do about what we are describing. In the late 16th century, the Spanish monarchy sent a questionnaire to its outposts in the Americas. The questions requested information on population demographics, political jurisdictions, languages spoken, physical terrain, and native vegetation. Local inhabitants created 191 written and visual responses to these questions, including a number of drawings explaining the

landscape of the region. Called the *Relaciones Geográficas*, many of these images were illegible to the Spanish because their makers did not use European conventions of depicting landscape or space. Instead, the artists relied upon local ways of seeing and explaining: distance is measured by landmarks, by movements of humans or animals, by built structures.

Argentine artist Miguel Angel Ríos follows a (pack) of mules as they meander up a mountain range in his (2015) single-channel video *Mulas*. A bag of white sand or powder is strapped to one mule's back, and a hole in the bag leaves a thin trail of white behind them. As the mules move, you hear only the sound of their feet on the ground, and their breath. Stones slip under their feet, and the clapping of their hooves makes a gentle rhythm. Like Rojas, Ríos has looked to the international trade of drugs to think about economies of exchange, especially in the Americas. But his work is also about landscape and the experience of it; he returns to this theme across his entire career, working in remote regions of Mexico, Argentina, and Bolivia, among other places. Politics and economics are always tied back to the *tierra* for Ríos. And, at the same time, they are implicated in individual, personal experiences. Interested in the psychedelic experience of the desert, Ríos has made extended forays into altered states. The landscape, then, isn't just a metaphor for larger socioeconomic things. Instead, it is a space of experience and unpredictability, of opening oneself up to unexpected and inexplicable modes of seeing.

In *Matta Clark* (2010), Melanie Smith pays homage to artist Robert Matta Clark's idea of anarchitecture (anarchy + architecture). Matta-Clark would slice into buildings, creating drawings and new spaces out of the resulting absences. Smith's photograph shows a circular hole cut into the wall of a building, through which we see the lush greenness of a tropical

landscape. Smith's series of photographs and videos from this site depict the entropy of the place: she studies the ways the landscape encroaches upon the built environment, eventually overwhelming the crumbling structures. *Fleur de Lys* (2010) is a surrealist vision. Photographed at Las Pozas, Xilitla in Mexico, here we see the strange, monumental architecture built by Edward James when he moved there, and we sense the precariousness of it all.

Since Christopher Columbus "discovered" the Americas, the descriptive language used to describe the landscapes here have also been laden with (and have created) stereotypes and misperceptions about the place and its inhabitants. "The act of writing (much like the act of naming) also has everything to do with taking possession," writes scholar Beatriz Rivera-Barnes. "From day one, the day they made landfall, this unknown world, so full of water and so very green, was there for the naming, the writing, and the taking. Therefore, from the very moment the admiral and his crew spotted the first signs of land, there was need for a new language."⁵ This naming—done by the explorers, the conquistadors, the outsiders—simultaneously erases the names (and the peoples, and the plants, and the animals) native to the Americas.

Miguel Ángel Rojas's small installation, *At the Edge of Scarcity* (2011) includes a coca leaf, folded to hold a small collection of grains that are native to Colombia. The artist points to the interconnectedness of the drug trade and systemic poverty. Demand and scarcity determine the region's economy, with its emphasis on feeding the drug habits in the first world rather than meeting the dietary needs of Colombians. This is not about naming the grains, not about documenting them, not about possessing them. It is about how they signify our own interrelationships and priorities. *Santa* (2005) is, Rojas says,

an image made from a holy wrath. Since 1994, Colombia has sprayed the herbicide glyphosate over rural farms, in an effort to eradicate coca plants and poppy fields. That “poison falling from heaven” as Rojas names it, has killed many other types of plants and animals, destroying the livelihood of rural farmers and barely putting a dent in the production of cocaine and opium in that country. Recent studies indicate that glyphosate also causes severe health problems in humans, and it has poisoned many rural water supplies in the region.⁶

While there have been exhibitions of traveler-explorer artists in the Americas, no exhibitions in the U.S. have taken contemporary visions of South America’s natural world, from the perspective of artists who are working from there now.⁷ *Mirando la flor* includes only a small fraction of the immensity of critical work coming from that region, on the subject of the environment. More specifically, it includes work coming from the region that uses nature to consider the inner workings of the human self. Here we see ourselves reflected, we see our dystopias predicted, and we see our use and misuse of the world around us. We see metaphors. We find sublimation. We plead for change.

Useless for the Spanish efforts at charting the Americas, the *Relaciones Geográficas* are nevertheless accurate and, in many cases, can still be used to direct one’s journey... if the non-native traveler is willing to change her method of map-reading, to meet the mapmaker on his own terms, and to see the landscape with fresh eyes. The artists here are not attempting to catalog or describe. They are not taking possession. If anything, they draw attention to a new mode of representing the world, and a new way of seeing our surroundings. Whereas the 18th and 19th centuries were marked by a documentary approach to the world—cataloging plant life and animal species, making new maps—our

century will be marked by other systems of knowledge. The 20th and 21st centuries will be defined by humans’ relationship to the world around us, as it changes at an unprecedented pace.

We end with a dystopia. Oscar Muñoz’s video *Distopía* is one of the few works in the exhibition to use text. In it, words slide off the page and disappear as they are dipped in liquid. Suggestive of photographic processes, Muñoz’s work is also a sophisticated meditation on the slipperiness of memory: photography and remembering are intertwined and unreliable. This slipperiness is why the documentation of climate change is precarious, why many people still claim to not be able to believe change is happening. We don’t trust the images we see, we find their alchemical processes inherently unreliable and subjective. We remember a different world, and yet we still fall ceaselessly into the erasure of that past world. “To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing,” Emerson writes. What are we left with, then? Stare as long as we can into Thomas Glassford’s *Aster*, and then let’s close our eyes. We are left with a burning after-image.

Laura A. L. Wellen is an independent curator and writer based in Houston.

Notes

Serrano Echeverría, Julio. *Central América*. Spain: Valparaíso Ediciones, 2014.

1. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “Nature” (1836). In *The Collected Works*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1971) 45.
2. Emerson, “Nature,” 23, 24.
3. Emerson, “Nature,” 20.
4. Cardoso, Maria Fernanda. “The Aesthetics of Reproductive Morphologies: on the Making of the Museum of Copulatory Organs.” (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012) 45.
5. Rivera Barnes, Beatriz and Jerry Hoeg. *Reading and Writing the Latin American Landscape*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 20.
6. In 2015, Colombia suspended its practice of spraying the herbicide.
7. One recent, notable exhibition of traveler artists in the Americas include *Boundless Reality: Traveler Artists’ Landscapes of Latin America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, at Hunter College in New York, NY, USA (2015).