



Shimmer

Dreaming the Posthuman

Educator Guide

Frist Art Museum

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Cover: Saya Woolfalk. *Floating World of the Cloud Quilt* (detail), 2022. Three-channel video projection, natural and synthetic fibers, digitally printed vinyl flooring, plastic, paint, paper, beads, notions, and gel medium; 406 × 72-144 (variable) × 108 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Saya Woolfalk. Image courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects. Photo: Etienne Frossard

Introduction: *Shimmer: Dreaming the Posthuman*

This exhibition features seventeen artists who explore humanity's interconnectedness with other species, technology, and the Earth itself, inviting us to reconnect with the more-than-human world. Created with both analog and digital technologies, their works pulse with shimmer—an otherworldly glow that illuminates enchanted realms where extinct species virtually reappear; machines become entwined with amoeba, slime, and microbes; and mysterious dancing avatars project messages of transformation and renewal. Through these works, new ways of understanding our interdependence with other forms of life, from microbes to whales, seem possible.

The word *posthuman* in this exhibition's title suggests the aftermath of our own extinction. It also challenges the notion that, because of our intelligence and self-awareness, we are superior to other forms of life. While humanist disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, and history encourage an understanding of individual humans and society, posthumanists contend that we must also feel empathy for all beings in order to heal our world, which is suffering from human abuse and exploitation.

This exhibition and the accompanying Educator Guide are organized into three sections. "Endangered Species" emphasizes the interdependence of different life-forms, from single-celled organisms and insects to animals and people. In "Dreams and Metamorphosis," fantastic scenes and hybrid shapeshifters reinforce the role of the radical imagination in changing our perceptions of the nonhuman world. "Everything Is Connected" features artists who link the emotions with science, human creativity with nonhuman intelligence, and Indigenous beliefs with speculative futures. As they morph, flicker, and dance, the artworks in these galleries demonstrate how artists can use new technologies to inspire us to embrace an ethic of care for the planet.



Scan this QR code for a glossary of the terms and technologies used in *Shimmer: Dreaming the Posthuman*.

Curriculum Connections

Tennessee Academic Standards

Fine Arts: Visual Arts

Grades K-12

CREATE: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.; Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.; Refine and complete artistic work.

PRESENT: Select, analyze and interpret artistic work for production.; Develop and refine artistic work for production.; Convey and express meaning through the production of artistic work.

RESPOND: Perceive and analyze artistic work.; Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.; Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

CONNECT: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to artistic endeavors.; Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context.

English Language Arts

Grades K-12: Cornerstone Standards

R.CS.6 Cornerstone: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

R.IKI.7 Cornerstone: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

SL.CC.1 Cornerstone: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with varied partners, building on others' ideas and expressing one's own ideas clearly and persuasively.

SL.CC.2 Cornerstone: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media formats, such as visual, quantitative, and oral formats.

SL.PKI.4 Cornerstone: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning; the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

W.TTP.1 Cornerstone: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

W.TTP.3 Cornerstone: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Science

Grades K-5

K.PS1: Matter and Its Interactions 1) Plan and conduct an investigation to describe and classify different kinds of materials including wood, plastic, metal, cloth, and paper by their observable properties (color, texture, hardness, and flexibility) and whether they are natural or human-made.

K.LS1: From Molecules to Organisms: Structures and Processes 1) Use information from observations to identify differences between plants and animals (locomotion, obtainment of food, and take in air/gasses).

K.ESS3: Earth and Human Activity 1) Use a model to represent the relationship between the basic needs (shelter, food, water) of different plants and animals (including humans) and the places they live

3.LS4: Biological Change: Unity and Diversity 1) Use evidence to explain the cause and effect relationship between a naturally changing habitat and how well an organism survives. 2) Use evidence to determine the changes between an environment's biodiversity and human resources. 3) Explain how changes to an environment's biodiversity influence human resources.

1.LS2: Ecosystems: Interactions, Energy, and Dynamics 3) Develop and use models to show how plants and animals depend on their surroundings and other living things to meet their needs in the places they live.

2.LS1: From Molecules to Organisms: Structures and Processes 2) Obtain and communicate information to classify animals (vertebrates-mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, fish, invertebrates-insects) based on their physical characteristics.

2.LS2: Ecosystems: Interactions, Energy, and Dynamics 1) Develop and use models to compare how animals depend on their surroundings and other living things to meet their needs in the places they live. 2) Predict what happens to animals when the environment changes (temperature, cutting down trees, wildfires, pollution, salinity, drought, land preservation).

2.ESS1: Earth's Place in the Universe 1) Recognize that some of Earth's natural processes are cyclical, while others have a beginning and an end. Some events happen quickly, while others occur slowly over time.

2.ETS2: Links Among Engineering, Technology, Science, and Society 2) Predict and explain how human life and the natural world would be different without current technologies.

3.LS1: From Molecules to Organisms: Structures and Processes 1) Use graphical representations to compare how species including humans and other organisms have unique and diverse life cycles. 2) Analyze the internal and external structures that aquatic and land organisms have to support survival, growth, behavior, and reproduction.

4.ESS3: Earth and Human Activity 1) Obtain and combine information to describe that energy, fuels, and materials are derived from natural resources and that some resources are renewable (e.g., sunlight, wind, water) and some are not (e.g., fossil fuels and minerals). 2) Engage in an argument, using evidence from research, that human activity (e.g., farming, mining, building) can affect the land and ocean in positive and/or negative ways.

4.LS2: Ecosystems: Interactions, Energy, and Dynamics 3) Develop and use models to determine the effects of introducing a species to, or removing a species from, an ecosystem and how either one can damage the balance of an ecosystem. 4) Analyze and interpret data about changes in the environment to explain how some organisms

may survive and reproduce, some may not survive, others move to new locations, yet others move into the transformed environment.

5.LS4: Biological Change: Unity and Diversity 1) Use evidence to construct an explanation for how variations in characteristics among individuals within the same species may provide advantages to these individuals in their survival and reproduction.

Grades 6-8

6.LS4: Biological Change: Unity and Diversity 1) Explain how changes to biodiversity in a system would impact human resources (e.g., food, medicine, and clean water) and "ecosystem services" (e.g., climate stabilization, decomposition of waste, and pollination).

6.ESS2: Earth's Systems 1) Diagram oceanic and atmospheric convection patterns in a system that flows due to uneven heating of the earth. 2) Gather evidence to justify that oceanic convection currents in a system are caused by the sun's transfer of thermal energy and differences in salinity leading to global water movement. 3) Construct an explanation for how atmospheric flow, geographic features, and ocean currents affect the climate of a region through heat transfer. 4) Develop and use a model to describe the cycling of water through Earth's systems driven by energy from the sun and the force of gravity. 5) Analyze and interpret data to determine the impact of humans and other organisms on the water cycle, landforms (e.g., rain shadow effect) and atmospheric systems. 6) Develop a model to explain the role of greenhouse gases in regulating the Earth's average surface temperature and keeping it habitable.

6.ESS3: Earth and Human Activity 1) Use data to explain the consumption and sustainability of natural resources (non-renewable and renewable) and the resulting impact on Earth's system. 2) Investigate and compare existing and developing technologies that utilize renewable and alternative energy resources. 3) Obtain, evaluate, and communicate information about the impacts of human activities on the biosphere including conservation, habitat management, species endangerment, and extinction.

7.LS2: Ecosystems: Interactions, Energy, and Dynamics 1) Develop a model to depict the cycling of matter, including carbon and oxygen, and the flow of energy among biotic and abiotic parts of an ecosystem.

8.LS4: Biological Change: Unity and Diversity 2) Construct an explanation addressing similarities and differences of the anatomical structures and genetic information between extinct and extant organisms using evidence of common ancestry and patterns between taxa. 4) Develop a scientific explanation of how natural selection plays a role in determining the survival and reproduction of a species in a changing environment. 5) Obtain, evaluate, and communicate information about the technologies that have changed the way humans use artificial selection to influence the inheritance of desired traits in other organisms.

Grades 9-12 Biology

BIO1.LS4: Biological Change: Unity and Diversity 5) Obtain, evaluate, and communicate information about how changes in environmental conditions may result in (1) increases in the number of individuals of some species, (2) the emergence of new species over time, and (3) the extinction of other species.

BIO2.LS4: Biological Change: Unity and Diversity 2) Using information based on the geologic time scale and history of life on Earth, look for patterns in changes in organisms over time and explain how these patterns support the theory of evolution. 6) Obtain information and compare features of Bacteria and Archaea. Ask questions about the evolution of each group. 18) Create an argument from evidence regarding the importance of plant relationships including symbiosis and co-evolutionary relationships (examples: mycorrhizae, Rhizobium, pollination, etc.).

Grades 9-12 Ecology

ECO.LS4: Biological Change: Unity and Diversity 4) Engage in argument from evidence regarding the importance of coevolution in species interactions (competition, predation, symbiosis). 5) Construct an explanation for the importance of keystone species in ecosystem stability. 6) Compare resource needs of specialists versus generalists. Construct an explanation regarding the vulnerability of specialists when faced with ecosystem disturbances. 7) Research and evaluate the effectiveness of strategies for maintenance of biodiversity.

ECO.ESS3: Earth and Human Activity 1) Research and evaluate the effectiveness of public lands (state parks, national parks, wildlife refuges, wilderness areas) in sustaining biodiversity. 2) Construct an argument in support of protection of native species. Develop responses to anticipated counterarguments. 3) Engage in argument from evidence regarding the impacts of human activity on climate change. Design solutions to address these impacts.

ECO.ETS2: Links Among Engineering, Technology, Science, and Society 1) Engage in argument from evidence regarding the impact engineering and technology have on biodiversity.

Grades 9-12 Environmental Science

EVSC.LS2: Ecosystems: Interactions, Energy, and Dynamics 1) Using a variety of data sources, construct an explanation for the impact of climate, latitude, altitude, geology, and hydrology patterns on plant and animal life in various terrestrial biomes. 2) Develop an explanation of behavioral and physical adaptations organisms have for life in aquatic habitats with varying chemical and physical features. 3) Using mathematical models, support arguments regarding the effects of biotic and abiotic factors on carrying capacity for populations within an ecosystem. 4) Compare and contrast production (photosynthesis, chemosynthesis) and respiratory (aerobic respiration, anaerobic respiration, consumption, decomposition) processes responsible for the cycling of matter and flow of energy through an ecosystem. Using evidence, construct an argument regarding the importance of homeostasis in maintaining these processes in ecosystems. 5) Use a mathematical model to explain energy flow through an ecosystem. Using the first and second laws of

thermodynamics, construct an explanation for: A) necessity for constant energy input B) limitations on energy transfer from one trophic level to the next and, C) limitations on number of trophic levels that can be supported. 6) Evaluate the interdependence among major biogeochemical cycles (water, carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus) in an ecosystem and recognize the importance each cycle has in maintaining ecosystem stability. 7) Examine stability and change within an ecosystem by using a model of succession (primary or secondary) to predict impacts of disruption on an ecosystem.

EVSC.LS4: Biological Change: Unity and Diversity 2) Justify claims with scientific evidence that changes in environmental conditions lead to speciation and extinction. 3) Evaluate the impact of habitat fragmentation and destruction, invasive species, overharvesting, pollution, and climate change on biodiversity (genetic, species, and ecosystem). 4) Engage in argument from scientific evidence critiquing effectiveness of the Endangered Species Act. Give specific examples to support your argument.

EVSC.ETS3: Applications of Science 1) Plan and carry out an investigation of a local ecosystem to assess human impacts. Based on your findings, design and evaluate a solution to minimize impacts.

Endangered Species

How is the definition of the human changing? What constitutes life, and what differentiates plant and animal, human and non-human? What are our responsibilities towards the planet, other people, and other life forms? And what would life look like without us?

–Cecilia Alemani¹

This first section of the exhibition invites viewers to consider complex questions such as whether the intelligence, adaptability, and self-awareness that humans possess make us superior to other forms of life. And, even if so, does this give us the right to exploit and destroy nonhuman species to the point of extinction?

Using analog and digital technologies, artists in this section visualize creatures ranging from single-celled organisms and termites to large mammals as having complex mental abilities like problem-solving, communicating, and remembering. If we knew that we share cognitive traits with other species, would this lead us to empathize with them and recognize that humans are not greater than or separate from nature, but deeply entangled with the broader ecosystems of which we are a part?

Note

1. Cecilia Alemani. "Statement by Cecilia Alemani, Curator of the 59th International Art Exhibition," La Biennale di Venezia, 2022.

Endangered Species: Marguerite Humeau



Marguerite Humeau. *Kuroshio*, 2022. Biological and synthetic resin and polymers, salt, algae, seaweed, bone, pigments, mineral dust, ocean plastic, glass, and stainless steel structure; 111 1/2 × 110 3/4 × 128 7/8 in. The Rachofsky Collection, courtesy of the artist, C L E A R I N G, and White Cube. Photo: Kevin Todora

Marguerite Humeau imagines that climate change and mass extinctions may lead other non-human species to become aware of their own possible extinction and begin “developing their own rituals, mythologies, and spirituality” to understand their mortality. This sculpture abstractly portrays a marine mammal that may be migrating, performing a secret ritual, or praying. From Humeau’s *Migrations* series, *Kuroshio* is named after a warm Pacific current that supports a rich diversity of marine life, from plankton to whales. Today, overfishing, climate change, and pollution threaten many species within this ecosystem. Humeau’s work invites us to consider: Could imagining nonhuman species as beings with their own forms of spirituality help humans develop a deeper relationship with the natural world?

Discussion questions

- How would you describe this sculpture’s shapes? What do they remind you of? If this sculpture could move, would it walk, fly, or swim? Why do you think that?
- This flowing form evokes something living in the ocean. *Kuroshio* is named after a Pacific Ocean current that is warming much faster than other parts of the ocean, impacting marine life. How do changing temperatures affect your daily routine? Do you think the effects could be similar for species that live in the ocean?
- Are you surprised to learn that this sculpture is made from materials like algae, seaweed, salt, and ocean plastic? Why do you think the artist included these materials?

Endangered Species: Katja Loher



Katja Loher. *Endangered Species* series, 2026. Four eight-channel video compositions played on video screens embedded in acrylic cases with glass and acrylic; 23 5/8 × 35 1/2 × 4 3/4 in. Duration: 8 min., 8 sec. each (looped). © Katja Loher. Image courtesy of the artist

In this iteration of Katja Loher's *Endangered Species* series, marine life is translated into immersive video-sculptures that poetically evoke the continuing loss of species. Glass "pills" contain videos of choreographed dances featuring performers dressed as sea creatures. The dancers move through vibrant environments that evoke the ecosystems where these species live. The works draw attention to species under threat and ways human actions are impacting the delicate balance of ecosystems. Loher collaborates with scientists to develop profiles of the featured species, including information about their habitats, their roles within ecosystems, their endangered status, and threats to their continued survival.

Rather than presenting ecological issues through facts alone, Loher uses movement, color, and light to create a sensory experience that invites viewers to connect emotionally with the natural world. The series encourages us to consider extinction not only as the loss of individual species, but also as the disappearance of the relationships and interconnected systems that make up an ecosystem and sustain life on Earth.

Discussion questions

- In the videos, human dancers wear costumes that make them look like various endangered species. Describe the dancers' movements. How do they imitate these animals?
- Why do you think the artist chose to use humans in these videos?
- How do the dances and the facts incorporated in these artworks change the way you think about these endangered species? Would you feel differently if you only saw photos of the animals? Why?

Activity: Species Storytelling (Inspired by Katja Loher's *Endangered Species Series*)

Objective: Students will research an endangered species and communicate scientific information through artistic expression, demonstrating how art can build empathy for biodiversity and ecosystem conservation.

Curriculum Connections:

Fine Arts, Visual Arts: CREATE, PRESENT, CONNECT

Science: 1.LS2, 2.LS1, 2.LS2, 3.LS4, 4.LS2, 5.LS4, 7.LS2, 8.LS4, ECO.LS4, EVSC.ETS3, EVSC.LS4, ECO.LS4, BIO2.LS4

The science standards supported by this activity vary depending on how the lesson is structured. See the optional step below for ways to tailor the activity to specific standards you're teaching.

Materials:

- Computer or tablet with internet access
- Poster and/or paper
- Pencils, markers, colored pencils, paint, or other available art materials
- Alternatively, if students are digitally designing their poster: design software or online design platform like Canva

Working in groups of approximately three, students will research an endangered species and create a poster that combines scientific information with artistic expression.

Step 1: Select species

Have each group select a species from the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species:

<https://www.iucnredlist.org/>.

Optional: Depending on the science standards you are teaching, teachers can use the IUCN Red List's advanced search filters to narrow students' choices. For example:

- To explore evolution and adaptation: Have all groups research different species from the same taxonomic family. After presentations, students can compare similarities and differences among closely related species and theorize about how they have adapted to different environments.
- To explore ecosystems: Have all groups research different species that share the same ecosystem. During presentations, students can examine the relationships between species, the roles they play within the ecosystem, and how shared environmental challenges impact them.

Step 2: Research

Have each group research their species, making note of the following:

- Habitat
- Species role within its ecosystem
- Conservation status and threats to species survival

After sharing their findings with each other, they will create a profile that includes key details about the above and write a brief statement about why protecting this species matters.

Step 3: Design a poster with an artistic element

Using their research, each group will design a poster that communicates both information and emotion. Like Katja Loher's *Endangered Species* series, posters should include along with scientific facts an artistic element that represents something students want to communicate to viewers about their species and its connections to other living things. The artistic element might be a drawing, painting, collage, poem, dance or movement piece, song, or short video or digital animation.

Students whose artistic response includes a performance-based artwork may perform live when they present the poster with the class. If your students or school have access to the appropriate technology, they may instead choose to record their performance and include a link or QR code on the poster.

Step 4: Reflection

After presentations, invite your class to reflect on the following questions:

- How did creating art change the way you thought about your species?
- What similarities did you notice between the needs of various species presented?
- Did you notice any similarities between the challenges faced by various species?
- How does studying multiple species from the same ecosystem help us better understand the ecosystem as a whole?

Endangered Species: Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg

Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg's works explore our relationships with nature and technology. *The Substitute* shows a digital reconstruction of a northern white rhinoceros, a subspecies of which only two females remain. First, we see an empty white room. A mass of pixels begins to appear, taking the rough shape of an animal. They begin to form an increasingly convincing rhinoceros, which wanders around a space that evokes a cage in a zoo or a sterile scientific lab. Apparently removed from its natural habitat, this virtual creature appears to be a captive specimen, living only for scientists and others to study and observe.



Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg. *The Substitute*, 2019. Video projection; 6 min., 18 sec. Courtesy of the artist. © Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg Ltd.

Ginsberg laments the continuing extinction of species due to human disregard or willful destruction. The last male northern white rhinoceros, named Sudan, died in March 2018, eliminating the possibility of natural reproduction. Scientists have long hoped to revive the subspecies, some collecting rhino sperm and eggs to produce embryos and others making stem cells, which are today kept frozen. They preserve the possibility of "de-extincting" the animals, if the technology to do so can be realized.

Ginsberg observes that such regenerated rhinos "might be better than having no rhino at all. Keeping them alive in our imagination could help us understand them better, help with conserving them and their ecosystems. But the animal becomes a technological object, reduced to a placeholder for a lost species." Ultimately, she feels that solutions for protecting biodiversity are not to be found solely in the magic of technology, but rather through the work of social and political change.

Discussion questions

- Is a digital re-creation a good substitute for a real animal? What can we observe and learn about an animal by watching it in a video like *The Substitute*?
- If, one hundred years from now, scientists develop a way to revive an extinct animal like the northern white rhinoceros using stem cells, what challenges might it face trying to survive in the wild? What are some reasons it might struggle to thrive the way northern white rhinos once did?

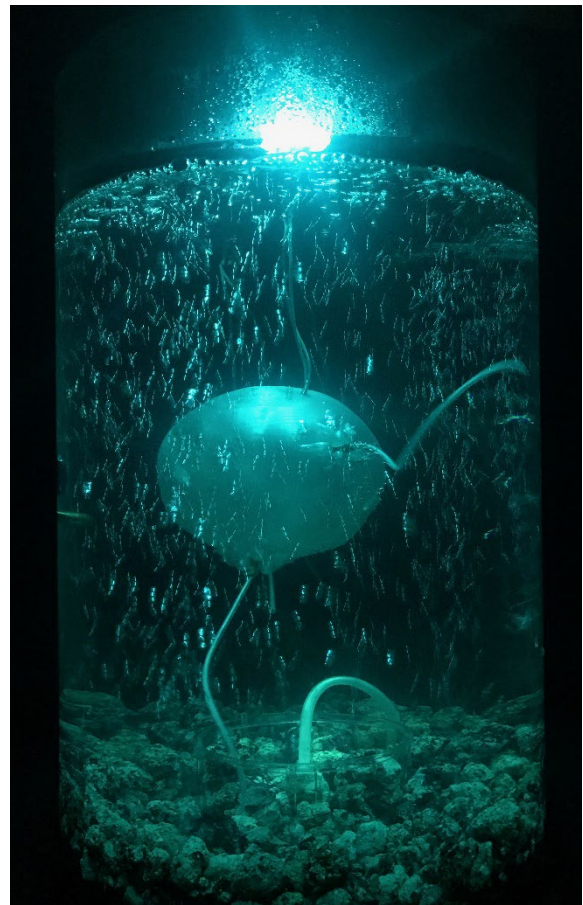
Endangered Species: Anna Dumitriu and Alex May

Anna Dumitriu and Alex May work with various media to explore such subjects as artificial life and synthetic biology—a field that involves redesigning existing biological systems or constructing artificial organisms to perform specific tasks. *ArchaeaBot* is an underwater robotic installation that explores what life might mean at a time when the Earth cannot sustain life as it does now and computers function independent of humanity. Combining research on archaea (single-celled microorganisms that can thrive in extreme conditions and are believed to represent the oldest form of life on Earth) with innovations in artificial intelligence and machine learning, the artists have imagined an “ultimate” species for the end of the world: a posthuman creature that merges an intelligent neural network with a body that can thrive in even the most toxic climate.

Video of *ArchaeaBot: A Post Climate Change, Post Singularity Life-Form*:
<https://vimeo.com/332099208>

Discussion questions

- *ArchaeaBot* seems to be a life-form from the future. How would you describe this creature?
- To make *ArchaeaBot*, the artists imagined combining ancient single-celled life-forms called *archaea*, which can live in extreme conditions like high temperatures, with an intelligent robot that can make its own decisions. Imagine a future environment where *ArchaeaBot* lives. How will this combination of traits help *ArchaeaBot* survive?



Anna Dumitriu and Alex May. *ArchaeaBot: A Post Climate Change, Post Singularity Life-Form*, 2018–26. Robot with 3D-printed PLA and silicone, electrical components, and microcontroller; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artists. © 2018 Anna Dumitriu and Alex May. Photo: Alex May

Dreams and Metamorphosis

Dreams carry a transformative potential, not just metaphorically but practically, in their ability to remake our world model and, in doing so, spark meaningful change. Dreams offer a powerful antidote to the feeling of futility and hopelessness many may be experiencing today.

—Julia Kaganskiy¹

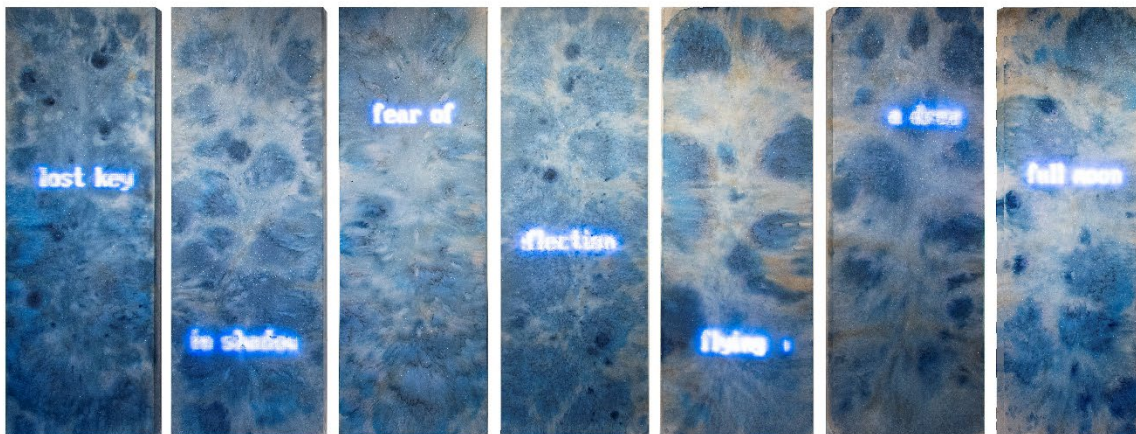
The artists featured in this section of *Shimmer* create dreamlike artworks that seek to challenge familiar habits and ways of thinking and encourage us to imagine positive change in our own lives and in the world around us.

Like the surrealist artists did a hundred years ago, they tell playful stories of metamorphosis; people become microbes and slime, and dreams become poetry. These works remind us that creativity and imagination can help us find hope, joy, and new ways of seeing the world.

Note

1. Julia Kaganskiy, "Dreaming a New Reality in the Age of Neural Media," in this exhibition's catalogue.

Dreams and Metamorphosis: Chalet Comellas



Chalet Comellas. *We interpret the dream, and the dream interprets the real*, 2024. Multimedia installation using silk, cotton, acrylic, natural dyes, salt, and coffee on canvas with LED programmable electronic signs on panels; 7 framed panels: 78 1/2 × 24 1/2 × 2 1/2 in. each. Courtesy of the artist. © Chalet Comellas. Photo: Jerry Atnip

To create this seven-part work, Chalet Comellas used DreamyBot AI, a dream-analysis software, to transform descriptions of her dreams into a poem. The program randomly rearranged words and phrases from the information she entered, creating mysterious sentences that move from one canvas to the next. The result feels like fragments of dreams or thoughts drifting through a shimmering, ethereal space.

Comellas's process shares similarities with the cut-up technique, a creative method used by surrealist writers and artists. In this technique, sentences or phrases are cut apart and rearranged to explore ideas that may lie beyond conscious awareness. As she explores the concept that dreams may reveal something unexpected, Comellas reflects the surrealists' desire to think beyond the limits of reason, time, and space in order to imagine the world from multiple perspectives.

Discussion questions

- The artist used the artificial intelligence app DreamyBot to interpret her dreams. She then arranged the resulting words and phrases into a digital poem that you can see scrolling across the work. Read the poem. What do you think the artist's dream was about?
- Do the poem or visuals remind you of any memories or dreams you have had?
- Can you think of any songs or movies that include unusual or nonsensical lyrics, scripts, or ideas that inspire you or create strong emotions? Why do you think ideas that don't always make logical sense can still create powerful feelings?

Activity: Interpreting Art Through Surrealist Poetry (Inspired by Chalet Comellas's *We interpret the dream, and the dream interprets the real*)

Objective: Students will examine how visual and written elements in an artwork shape meaning, analyze word choices and structure, and create a surrealist-inspired poem using the cut-up technique.

Curriculum Connections:

Fine Arts, Visual Arts: RESPOND, CONNECT

English Language Arts: R.CS.6, R.IKI.7, SL.CC.1, SL.CC.2

Materials:

- Paper with question prompts
- Pencil
- Loose blank or lined paper (to be cut up)
- Scissors

Step 1: Observe and reflect

Share Chalet Comellas's *We interpret the dream, and the dream interprets the real*. If visiting *Shimmer* in person, invite students to spend time observing Comellas's work and provide them with the prompts below and paper and a pencil to jot down notes.

If adapting this activity to take place fully in the classroom: Use a still reproduction of Comellas's work or select another artwork that uses poetic or mysterious language to inspire discussion.

Students can either write a few notes privately in response to the questions below or discuss their ideas as a group while a designated note-taker records the groups' observations. Tell students that these responses are not being graded or collected for review; their notes can be informal or based on first impressions rather than polished interpretations.

Questions to prompt reflections:

- What words would you use to describe the way this artwork looks and feels?
- What do you notice about the colors, materials, movement, and text?
- How does the way the words appear affect how you read or understand them?
- What associations do you have with these words?
 - Adapted for younger students: What do these words remind you of? Are there any stories or feelings they make you think of?

After observing the artwork, explain to students: Comellas used DreamyBot AI to transform descriptions of her dreams into a poem. The program rearranged words and phrases from her descriptions, creating unexpected combinations. Inspired by the surrealist cut-up technique, Comellas explores how rearranging language can create new meanings and invite different interpretations.

Step 2: Jumble the reflections

Ask students to choose approximately four sentences or phrases from their reflection and rewrite them neatly.

Once they are finished, have students cut out each individual word so that they are left with a pile of single words. Instruct them to jumble the words so original sentences are not distinguishable.

Step 3: Exchange words

Have each student move to a new desk and sit in front of another student's pile of words. You can explain that this next part of the activity will be similar to magnet poetry (if familiar to them), where miscellaneous words are rearranged to create poems and other lyrical phrases.

Step 4: Write a poem

Using the words in front of them, each student should create a poem. Students do not need to use every word in the pile. For example, a student may write a short poem using only twenty words from a pile of sixty-five words. Encourage them to experiment with different combinations. Give students at least five to ten minutes to create their poems.

Step 5: Share and discuss

Once students finish, have them leave their poems at the desk and return to their original seats, where they can read the new poem someone else created using their reflection words. Then invite students to walk around the room to view all the poems, or ask volunteers to read some aloud.

As a group, discuss how rearranging the words transformed the original reflections into something new. Ask whether anyone had new ideas or interpretations of the original artwork after trying out the cut-up technique.

Dreams and Metamorphosis: Ian Cheng

Many technologically generated characters in this exhibition seem to be able to think for themselves. This ability is the subject of Ian Cheng's *Thousand Lives*, a simulation using AI technology that can generate predictions, interpretations, and decisions. The work shows Cheng's interest in designing virtual worlds in which machine learning and video game engines can model ways for people to navigate society's changing environment. The artwork follows an artificial pet tortoise named Thousand. It lives in a virtual apartment with a young woman named Chalice. As Thousand explores this small world, it learns from its experiences and adapts to its environment over time. This process occurs without being predicted or controlled by the artist or any other human agent.



Ian Cheng. *Thousand Lives*, 2023. Live simulation with sound; infinite duration. Courtesy of the artist; Pilar Corrias, London; and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. © Ian Cheng. Image courtesy of the artist

Thousand and Chalice first appeared in Cheng's 2021 film *Life After BOB: The Chalice Study*, which shows a future in which AI merges with human minds. Art critic Julia Kaganskiy writes that the two films take place in "a future world in which the internet extends into our nervous systems. . . . and AI entities co-inhabit human minds . . . [exploring themes of] self-determination in an age of AI."

Discussion questions

- Cheng created this turtle, named Thousand, using video game engines and artificial intelligence. The artist has described this work as a video game that plays itself; Thousand is making its own choices about what to do next. What actions did you see Thousand take? What choices did Thousand make to meet its basic needs of warmth, comfort, safety, and food?
- Think about your daily routine. How is it similar to Thousand's? How is it different? Why is it important to learn new behaviors to adapt to changes in your environment?

Dreams and Metamorphosis: Libby Heaney

While slime is often considered gross, scientists marvel at this primitive organism and its “cellular intelligence,” which enables it to find its way through its environment, avoid toxic substances, and respond to changes without having a brain or nervous system. Combining physical matter with technology, this dreamlike video shows slime oozing across and through various entities, ranging from a structure that could be a chandelier or a quantum processor to an open mouth.



Libby Heaney. *slimeQrawl* (installation view), 2023. Two-channel video projection; 14 min., 22 sec. Courtesy of the artist. © Libby Heaney. Image courtesy of HEK Basel and the artist. Photo: Franz Wamhof

Libby Heaney has a PhD in quantum physics, a field that proposes that particles and waves connecting the universe are not fixed in time or place but rather exist in multiple states at the same time. She sees in slime a symbol of this fluidity and interconnectedness, representing transformation, possibility, and the blurred boundaries between living and nonliving things, between life and death, and even between parallel universes.

Discussion questions

- How many slimy things related to plants, animals, or other living organisms can you think of? What purposes might slime serve in helping these organisms survive?
- When you hear the word “slime,” what words, images, or feelings come to mind? How does this artwork challenge or reinforce those ideas?
- We often think about intelligence as something connected to having a brain. However, some organisms without brains, like slime, can sense their surroundings, respond to changes, and make choices that help them survive. What other examples can you think of that demonstrate intelligence or problem-solving without a physical brain (for example, trees, robots, bacteria, etc.)?
- What else do you see besides slime? After listening to responses, ask: The artwork combines slime with digital technology and other non-slime objects. What connections do you notice between these different parts of the artwork? What story or ideas do you think the artist is exploring?

Activity: Biomimicry Design Challenge (Inspired by Libby Heaney's *slimeQrawl*)

Objective: Students will challenge their assumptions about nonhuman intelligence, investigate the functions of slime in nature, and apply principles of biomimicry to design a solution to a real-world problem, inspired by slime.

Curriculum Connections:

Fine Arts, Visual Arts: RESPOND, CONNECT

Science: 1.ETS1, 2.ETS1, 3.ETS1, 4.ETS1, 5.ETS1, 6.ETS1, 7.ETS1, BIO2.ETS2

This activity is inspired by Teach Engineering's Hands-On Activity: *Biomimicry: Natural Designs*. Though this activity differs from the original, the resource may also be helpful when developing your lesson:

https://www.teachengineering.org/activities/view/cub_bio_lesson05_activity1

Materials:

- Projector
- Computers or tablets with internet access (optional)
- Poster
- Paper
- Pencils
- Colored pencils and/or markers

Optional introductory step: Rethinking slime through art

Though optional, visiting and reflecting on Libby Heaney's *slimeQrawl* may help students challenge their preconceived ideas about slime and reconsider slime as something complex and valuable. If visiting the exhibition *Shimmer*, have students consider some of these questions while observing *slimeQrawl*:

- How does looking at or thinking about slime make you feel? What associations or memories do you have with slime?
- If you discovered a glob of slime-like goo in your yard or a park, how would you react? Would you feel curious, excited, grossed out, or concerned? Why?
- What else do you notice in this video art beyond the slime? What other objects, images, or ideas appear? Can you create a story about how the slime connects with these non-slime elements?
- How would you describe the mood or feeling of this artwork?

Step 1: Introduce biomimicry, slime, and the design challenge

Share the design challenge the students will explore throughout this project: How can we use the strategies and abilities of slime, found in nature, to solve a human problem?

Next, introduce *biomimicry*: the practice of learning from and mimicking strategies found in nature to solve human challenges. Biomimicry focuses on applying ideas from nature's forms, processes, and ecosystems to create innovative solutions.

Share that, throughout history, humans have looked to nature for inspiration. Birds inspired airplane designs, termites inspired energy-efficient buildings, and burrs inspired the invention of Velcro. To learn more about biomimicry and explore examples appropriate for your students, visit:

- <https://biomimicry.org/inspiration/what-is-biomimicry/>
- https://www.teachengineering.org/activities/view/cub_bio_lesson05_activity1

Explain that in this activity, students will investigate slime and slime-producing organisms and use what they learn from nature to design a new invention or solution for a real-world issue. For an introductory video, share the Biomimicry Institute's "Slime Mold 101: Meet the Genius Without a Brain": <https://biomimicry.org/slime-mold-101-meet-the-genius-without-a-brain/> Other resources can be found in this guide's Resources section after this activity.

Step 2: Discover the unexpected abilities of slime

Share about slime's surprising abilities and importance in nature. Encourage students to think beyond slime as something "gross" and instead consider slime as a powerful and brilliant tool that helps organisms survive.

- Slime molds can sense their surroundings, find food, and create efficient networks.
- Slime can flow, spread, and respond to changes in its environment.
- Many animals use mucus or slime as a defense mechanism.
- Slime-producing organisms play important roles in food webs and nutrient cycles.
- Researchers and engineers study slime to develop new materials and technologies.

Step 3: Slime research investigation

Students will now research slime-producing organisms and record examples of how slime is useful in the natural world.

Students should identify:

- What are some organisms that create or use slime?
- Why is slime important in relation to these organisms?
- What abilities does slime have that humans might find useful? What problems could these abilities help solve?

Students should collect approximately five to seven examples of slime's abilities to help inspire their inventions.

If enough computers are available for all students, each student can conduct independent research. If access is limited, students could work in groups to research or use a teacher-provided info sheet with examples listed.

Step 4: Small-group slime inventors

Divide students into small groups. Groups should share their research findings and identify one slime-inspired strategy they want to explore.

Students should brainstorm:

- The natural inspiration: What organism or slime behavior inspired your idea?
- The human challenge: What problem does your invention solve?
- The design solution: How does your invention use ideas from slime?

Step 5: Design a prototype pitch

- Groups create a poster that presents their invention. Posters should include:
- Name of invention
- Problem being solved
- How they were inspired by slime
- A brief description of how the invention works plus a drawing or diagram of the design
- Why this solution could help people or the planet

Step 6: Present and reflect

Lastly, groups will present their designs to the class. After presentations, students can vote on categories such as most creative solution, most useful invention, or best connection to nature.

Select a few reflection questions to discuss as a group:

- How did your understanding of slime change during this activity?
- How does thinking about slime as something living, adaptive, or intelligent change the way you view it?
- What other things in nature might inspire future inventions?
- What can studying things we think are unusual or that we often overlook, such as slime, teach us about the natural world?

Resources

Video: PBS Be Smart's "Are You Smarter Than a Slime Mold?":

<https://www.pbs.org/video/its-okay-be-smart-slime-molds/>

Video and Article: PBS Deep Look's "This Pulsating Slime Mold Comes in Peace":

<https://www.pbs.org/video/deep-look-slime-mold/>

<https://www.kqed.org/science/635319/this-pulsating-slime-mold-comes-in-peace>

NOVA PBS's "Slime Mold Smarts": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ils27hu03yw>

Biomimicry Institute's "Slime Mold 101: Meet the Genius Without a Brain":

<https://biomimicry.org/slime-mold-101-meet-the-genius-without-a-brain/>

"The Wild Center's Nature Lab presents Slime Time":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKNPN0-Gpd8>

Natural History Museum of Los Angeles's "Nickelodeon Science of Slime":

<https://nhm.org/science-slime>

Everything Is Connected

Drawing on a posthuman lens we . . . explore shimmering as incorporating a sensorial richness, as beauty and grandeur, as constantly in flux, moving between past, future and back again. Shimmering has potentiality in a posthuman context in its encompassing of spiritual and ancestral energies.

—Karen Malone¹

Posthumanism recognizes that humans, machines, animals, and ecosystems are deeply entangled and cocreate the world together. Using a posthuman perspective to explore who we are in relation to the cosmos, artists in this section connect dreams with history, human creativity with nonhuman intelligence, and Indigenous animism (the belief that all things, including animals, plants, rocks, rivers, and even machines have spirit or agency) with new digital technologies. Filled with shimmer, their works blur the boundaries between humanity and the nonhuman world.

Note

1. Karen Malone et al., "Shimmering with Deborah Rose: Posthuman Theory-Making with Feminist Ecophilosophers and Social Ecologists," *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* 36, no. 2 (July 2020).

Everything Is Connected: Amelia Winger-Bearskin

Amelia Winger-Bearskin, a member of the Seneca-Cayuga Nation, uses technology to explore connections between land, memory, and ways of understanding the world informed by her Indigenous heritage. Part of her ongoing *Sky World / Cloud World* series, this work reflects on the sky as a space of connection beyond human-made boundaries. To create the piece, the artist used AI-based image editing tools to remove signs of human presence from landscape footage she recorded during a cross-country road trip. She then used another digital process called *image interpolation* to blend and transform these landscapes into a dreamlike environment where the Earth appears to breathe, ripple, and shift, suggesting that the land itself is alive.



Amelia Winger-Bearskin. *I Would Like to Be Midnight / I Would Like to Be Sky*, 2023. Video; 10 min., 27 sec. Courtesy of the artist. © 2023 Amelia Winger-Bearskin. Image courtesy of the artist

Winger-Bearskin's voice becomes part of the experience, creating an ethereal soundtrack as the landscapes transform. A transparent half-dome shape appears throughout the video. The dome resembles the shape of a human head, which suggests a connection between the human mind and the natural world, reminding viewers of our inextricable relationship with the Earth.

Discussion questions

- Winger-Bearskin created this video art using landscape footage she collected as she drove across the United States. What do you notice about the landscapes in this work? Is anything missing? Is this how the landscape really looks? What is unusual about it?
- The artist used an artificial intelligence program to remove all signs of human life from the land. How does the way you view the environment change when humans are removed?
- The landscapes in this video flow together in rippling formations. Why do you think the artist used this effect?
- How does the title connect with the visuals?

Activity: Earth's Point of View (Inspired by Amelia Winger-Bearskin's *I Would Like to Be Midnight / I Would Like to Be Sky*)

Objective: Students will explore perspective by writing from the viewpoint of a physical landscape, using creative writing to consider the interconnected relationships between humans, ecosystems, and the natural world.

Curriculum Connections:

Fine Arts, Visual Arts: RESPOND, CONNECT

English Language Arts: R.CS.6, SL.CC.1, SL.CC.2, W.TTP.3

Materials:

- Paper and pencil or pen
- Computer (optional, if students will type their journal entries)

Step 1: Profile of a landscape

After observing Winger-Bearskin's immersive video art, explain that the artist encourages viewers to see the Earth not simply as a backdrop for human life, but as a living, interconnected presence. Invite students to imagine what a landscape might say if it could tell its own story.

Students will write a series of first-person journal entries from the perspective of a landscape. They may choose a real place they know well or imagine one of their own, but it should be based on an existing landscape rather than a fictional or fantasy landscape.

Before they begin writing, have students develop a profile of their landscape by jotting down notes that consider questions such as:

- What are the prominent physical features of the landscape?
- What kind of weather and seasonal changes are typical?
- What grows there?
- What creatures (including humans, if any) visit or live near this place?
- Have any notable historical moments occurred here?
- How has the landscape changed over time?

Step 2: Journal from the landscape's perspective

Invite students to imagine the landscape has a voice and write several journal entries from its point of view over a particular span of time (hours, months, years, millenia).

Provide prompts to help students imagine what the landscape might say such as:

- I remember when . . .
- Listen closely, and you will hear . . .
- If I could tell one story about what I have witnessed, it would be . . .

- Something people appreciate about me is . . .
- Something nonhuman creatures appreciate about me is . . .
- My favorite smell is . . .
- Something people may not notice about me is . . .
- I hope that in the future I will . . .

Step 3: Small-group discussion of writing choices

Ask students to share excerpts with a partner or small group. After each reads their excerpt to their group or partner, discuss the following:

- Listener(s) share: What words or descriptions helped you imagine the reader's landscape?
- Reader shares: How did writing from the perspective of the landscape change the way you think about that place? What did your landscape want people to understand?

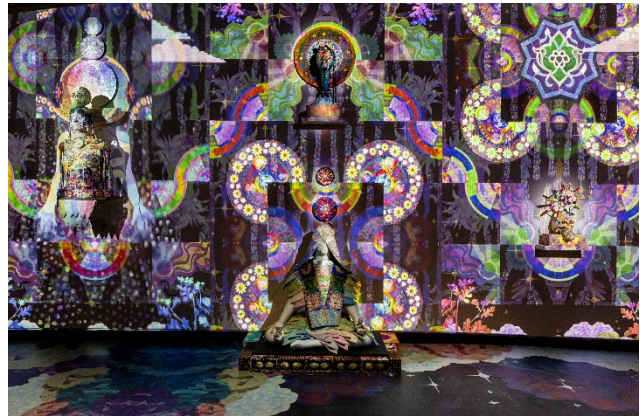
Step 4: Final reflection

Discuss as a class: How can different forms of expression, such as writing from the perspective of a landscape versus creating video art (with images, sound, and movement), help people understand their connection to the natural world in new ways?

Everything Is Connected: Saya Woolfalk

In this immersive environment, Saya Woolfalk combines ideas from anthropology, science fiction, and non-Western philosophies to imagine a utopian world inhabited by the Empathics, a fictional race of human-plant hybrids. These beings blur the boundaries between human and plant species and live in a world built on care, cooperation, and transformation.

Woolfalk's work reflects the idea of interbeing, a Buddhist concept that describes how humans, animals, plants, and the natural world are deeply connected and exist through one another. The quiltlike composition makes other references to Asian cultures: The title recalls the Japanese notion of the floating world of transient pleasure, while elements of the projection suggest Buddhist mandalas and thangkas, ritual Yogic postures, and Hindu deities with multiple arms. Combining physical objects with digital animation, *Floating World of the Cloud Quilt* creates a dreamlike environment where identity is flexible and new possibilities for connection and community can be imagined.



Saya Woolfalk. *Floating World of the Cloud Quilt* (installation view), 2022. Three-channel video projection, natural and synthetic fibers, digitally printed vinyl flooring, plastic, paint, paper, beads, notions, and gel medium; 406 × 72-144 (variable) × 108 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Saya Woolfalk. Image courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects. Photo: Etienne Frossard

Discussion questions

- In this work, Woolfalk depicts futuristic human-plant hybrids. How would you describe these beings and the world they live in?
- The artist created this immersive experience to reflect her hope that, in the future, all species will have empathy for each other. Can you imagine what it would be like to live in this world?
- What are your hopes for the future?

Activity: Utopia Quilt (Inspired by Saya Woolfalk's *Floating World of the Cloud Quilt*)

Objective: Students will imagine a future world built on empathy, care, and environmental stewardship by creating a collaborative quilt that visually represents the natural world they value and want to protect.

Curriculum Connections:

Fine Arts, Visual Arts: CREATE, PRESENT, RESPOND, CONNECT

English Language Arts: R.IK.7, SL.CC.1, SL.CC.2

Optional ELA Connection: Additional reading and discussion can be incorporated to strengthen the activity's connections to the ELA standards above. Consider pairing the activity with books or graphic novels that explore themes found in Saya Woolfalk's work, such as fantasy, science fiction, utopias, or futuristic heroes.

Materials:

- Various art supplies (see steps 3 and 4)

Step 1: Tell a story

Though Saya Woolfalk depicts unreal, fantastical, futuristic creatures in her artwork, it is inspired by a real-world issue that she believes is important: a lack of empathy. Empathy is the effort to understand and care about what others are experiencing. In this installation, the figures are called Empathics. They are a race of multispecies beings that are part human and part plant, whose world revolves around interdependent care for all living things and continual transformation. The exhibition *Shimmer* explores the interconnectedness of all living things on Earth.

Introduce the word *utopia*. A utopia is an imagined place or world where people, nature, and communities live together in the best possible way. It is a place where people dream about how the world could be even better.

This work is titled *Floating World of the Cloud Quilt*. One reason the background patterns in this work and its title evoke the idea of a quilt is because, according to Woolfalk, "A quilt is an object of comfort, warmth, and protection, and it is also a space for dreaming." Together, the class will dream up a utopia quilt that represents the ideals of your classroom community. It will be made up of all the things from nature that students wish more people understood, valued, and protected.

Step 2: Make a list of what matters

Think about the natural world, including animals, plants, landmarks, bodies of water, or the Earth itself. What are some things you care about and wish more people would learn about and protect?

Make a list of your ideas.

Step 3: Design your quilt square

Provide students with a paper handout featuring a template of quilt squares that are roughly the same size as the final individual quilt square. Invite students to sketch their ideas before creating their final design.

Ask students to imagine a world where the things on their list are valued and protected. Use colors, patterns, images, and symbols to create a design that represents why these things matter.

Create a quilt square that represents one or more ideas from your list.

Step 4: Create

Provide each student with their official quilt square base. This step can be adapted based on the materials available, students' ages, and level of experience with different art-making processes.

Throughout her artistic practice, including in works beyond this exhibition, Woolfolk experiments with a wide range of materials and techniques, such as paper and fabric collage, digital design, sculpture, and more. Encourage students to choose the materials and processes that best communicate their ideas for their imagined future world.

Possible materials and techniques for creating utopia quilt squares include:

- Fabric collage or decoupage
- Kinusaiga (a Japanese fabric collage technique)
- Paper collage
- Drawing with pencils, markers, or other dry media
- Digital design tools
- Painting on small square canvases or heavy paper
- Hand-sewn appliqué

Step 5: Combine and reflect

Once students complete their individual quilt squares, combine them to create one class utopia quilt. Depending on the materials used, the squares can be stitched together like a real quilt or attached to a cardboard or foam-board backing using glue, tape, fabric glue, or other appropriate materials. Alternatively, if students will be taking their quilt squares home, simply arrange the squares together on a table or floor to create a temporary quilt-like composition.

Together, these individual designs create a shared vision of a community built on care, connection, and respect for all living things. Invite students to share their quilt squares and explain what they represent.

Then discuss as a group:

- Can you find connections between different quilt squares? How might the things represented in different squares work together or depend on one another?
- What challenges might we face in creating a world where these things are valued and protected? What choices or actions could help make this vision possible?
- How can creating imaginary worlds, like Saya Woolfalk's world of the Empathics or our class utopia quilt, help us imagine new possibilities for the future and think about changes we can make today?

ROBIN VUCHNICH

In Search of *Thoreau's Flowers*
—The Memory of a Season

Robin Vuchnich: In Search of Thoreau's Flowers—The Memory of a Season is an immersive installation presented as a companion to *Shimmer: Dreaming the Posthuman*.

The nineteenth-century philosopher Henry David Thoreau has long been celebrated for his profound essays on subjects ranging from natural history to social justice. In his most prominent work, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), Thoreau meditates on the transcendent experience of living in direct communion with nature. Throughout his life, Thoreau collected many species of plants from the region around Concord, Massachusetts, the site of Walden Pond. Today, much of his herbarium of dried and pressed specimens is housed at the Harvard University Herbaria.

New-media artist Robin Vuchnich draws inspiration from Thoreau to create interactive, light-based installations that bring to life her own interest in environmental stewardship and the loss of biodiversity. To create the first part of her installation *In Search of Thoreau's Flowers*, Vuchnich drew from the Harvard collection to compose a projected grid of pressed plants. This data visualization is color coded to reveal research from scientists tracking species decline in Concord. If Thoreau walked those woods today, he would find a very different landscape: More than half of the plant species he collected are now declining toward local extinction.

In Massachusetts as around the world, such loss is attributable to—or, in some cases, hastened by—human activity and neglect. Vuchnich's installation also features an immersive projection of floral species in decline around Walden Pond. A field of colorful flowers covers three walls of the gallery, nearly surrounding the viewer with stunning beauty and sensory abundance. As viewers move across the gallery, a sensor picks up their movement, which instantly affects, disrupts, or alters the fields of flowers on the walls. The metaphor is clear: Whether we can see it or not, human presence changes nature. When the viewer stops moving, the fields of flowers return to full glory.



Robin Vuchnich. *In Search of Thoreau's Flowers—The Memory of a Season* (installation view), 2025. Courtesy of the artist. © Robin Vuchnich

Discussion questions

- How does the artwork change as people move through the gallery?
- Why do you think the artist chose to surround visitors with flowers on three walls instead of displaying their art on just one wall?
- Have you ever noticed changes in a natural place you visit regularly? What changed, and what do you think caused it?
- How can art help people understand environmental issues differently than a list or report of scientific facts or data alone?

Shimmer

Dreaming the Posthuman

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ROBIN VUCHNICH

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—The Memory of a Season

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