





Shimmer

Dreaming the Posthuman

Shimmer: Dreaming the Posthuman blurs the boundaries between dreams and reality, human creativity and nonhuman consciousness, and physical and virtual experiences. Using both analog and digital technologies, artists in *Shimmer* have devised new visual languages to show our interdependence with the more-than-human world. The works on view convey the quality of shimmer—a transient glow that makes things appear immaterial and otherworldly. In the gallery’s luminous space, extinct species virtually reappear; machines become entwined with amoeba, slime, and microbes; mysterious, light-filled avatars float and dance through fantastic landscapes; and the earth reveals itself to be a living organism.

While it may suggest the aftermath of our species’ extinction, the philosophical term *posthuman* is meant to question the humanist and Enlightenment view of human exceptionalism—that our advanced self-awareness, ability to reason and adapt, and capacity for abstract thought make us superior to other species. Although humans do have an outsized ability to control our environment, we have not always understood our ethical charge for care. Instead, we often act as if we have license to extract and exploit resources with no thought to our impact on vulnerable ecosystems.

This dynamic is the subject of Marina Zurkow’s *Mesocosm*, which shows flora and fauna coexisting in front of a desert sinkhole (cover). People in yellow hazmat suits appear to be searching for clues to the cause of this human-made occurrence, which may have released toxins. The animation is based on an actual sinkhole in the oil fields of West Texas that continues to expand at an alarming rate. By including a picnic table, barbecue grill, and billboard, Zurkow suggests that, in the future, such sites may become scenic curiosities for sightseers who are oblivious to the ecological disaster in front of them. The alternative is to follow a posthuman path, learning from the incident how to prevent such occurrences and recognizing that when we protect the environment, we are protecting ourselves.



In early research for the exhibition, I began to see themes emerging that had roots in surrealism: stories of metamorphosis, the embrace of the irrational, art as a means of liberation, and the role of dreams in inspiring change. I remembered the 2022 Venice Biennale exhibition by curator Cecilia Alemani, titled *The Milk of Dreams* after a book by surrealist Leonora Carrington. Showing earlier surrealists alongside contemporary artists influenced by the movement, Alemani raised questions that had inspired these artists: “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?”¹ As challenging as these questions may be, they affirm that, in these unstable times, artists can act as speculative soothsayers for whom uncertainty about our future becomes an opportunity to shape it.

Entering the Biennale, a vast stage where viewers can see art from around the world, I encountered a trio of stunning monumental sculptures by French artist Marguerite Humeau. These elegant white and gray forms look like abstractions of marine life. At center was *Kuroshio* (fig.1), named after a Pacific current that carries warm equatorial water along the coast of Japan. This current creates a rich feeding ground for many species but is now threatened by overfishing, climate change, and pollution.

In *Kuroshio*, on view in the Ingram Gallery during *Shimmer*, Humeau imagined a marine mammal that has become aware of its own mortality. She explains, “Maybe because of climate change and mass extinctions, animals are also getting conscious of their own death, and maybe they’re developing their own rituals, mythologies, and spirituality.”² With its biomorphic shapes, the work acknowledges the imagery of surrealist artists like Dorothea Tanning, Yves Tanguy, and Salvador Dalí. But instead



of focusing on the hidden world of humans' dreams, desires, and fantasies, Humeau envisions the inner lives of porpoises and whales. Her work raises an intriguing question: could imagining a spirituality that connects different species help us feel a stronger bond with the natural world?

Kuroshio opens the first section of exhibition, which focuses on humanity's impact on our planet's ecosystems. Other artists in this section collaborate with scientists to explore the social structures of termites and the artificial re-creation of an extinct white rhino, and, in *ArchaeaBot*, to imagine the offspring of a primitive single-celled life-form and an advanced robot, which could take over the planet long after humanity is gone (fig. 2).

Just as the surrealists did a hundred years ago, artists in the second section of the exhibition upend patterns of habit and convention that limit our ability to dream of worlds open to positive change. They pose the question: Can



technology-generated dreamscapes, in which anything can happen, help unearth an unconscious sense of belonging in a world beyond our own bodies and egos? They answer through playful visions of transformation. People become inseparable from microbes and slime; dreams become poetry; and, in Jacolby Satterwhite's universe, female robots vogue furiously across the landscape, defying the pain of the world with vitality and joy (fig. 3).

Katja Loher's video-sculptures employ the theme of metamorphosis to show how human life is dependent on nature in ways that are not always visible. Her films feature footage of people dressed as other species, such as bees and plankton, who gracefully dance within environments rich with microscopic life, plants and

animals, and colorful liquids (fig. 4). The videos are placed within organically shaped glass bubbles that act as convex and concave lenses, adding a dreamlike distortion to the videos. Humans are central to this ballet—not as separate and superior beings but as reminders that, without bees to pollinate plants and plankton to generate oxygen, our very existence would be threatened.



The exhibition concludes with artists who explore the possibility that mental qualities of some sort exist in everything: atoms and germs, plants and animals, water and rocks, even human-made tools and technology. This concept is not new. It appears in the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato and in aspects of Hinduism and Buddhism. Christian theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas held that plants and animals possess souls, distinct from the human soul yet part of a shared “life-principle.”

Similar ideas animate the works of Saya Woolfalk. Using both analog and digital media, Woolfalk imagines a world made more compassionate and empathetic through what she calls “interspecies hybridization.” *Floating World of the Cloud Quilt* is an immersive environment featuring projections of computer-generated imagery, including floating clouds and psychedelic floral wreaths, spinning hypnotically on the wall (fig. 5). The work reflects the Buddhist concept of interbeing, which suggests that humans, animals, plants, and the material world exist through one another rather than apart from one another. The quiltlike composition makes other references to Asian cultures: The title recalls the Japanese notion of the floating world as one of social transience, while elements of the projection suggest Buddhist mandalas and *thangkas*, ritual Yogic postures, and Hindu



deities with multiple arms. The room also contains figures called Empathics, beings imagined by the artist as humans whose DNA has fused with that of plants, yielding a hybrid that thrives on interspecies communication, compassion, and care.

The interweaving of Woolfalk’s visual languages opens new perspectives on what it means to be human. As they experiment with emerging technology, all the artists in *Shimmer* similarly help us see our biological, psychological, and philosophical entanglements with the nonhuman world in new ways.

Mark Scala

Chief Curator

Notes

1. “Statement by Cecilia Alemani, Curator of the 59th International Art Exhibition,” La Biennale di Venezia, updated 2022, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/statement-cecilia-alemani>.

2. Marguerite Humeau, “Marguerite Humeau on ‘Migrations,’ Her Sculptural Sea Creatures at the Venice Art Biennale,” interview by Sofia Lekka Angelopoulou, Designboom, May 16, 2022, <https://www.designboom.com/art/marguerite-humeau-migrations-sculptural-sea-creatures-venice-art-biennale-05-16-2022/>.

Image Credits

Cover: Marina Zurkow. *Mesocosm (Wink, TX)*, 2012. Custom real-time generative software animation with sound; 146-hour cycle (24-minute day, 146-hour year). Collection of the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Foundation, Courtesy of bitforms gallery, New York. Image courtesy of bitforms gallery NY and the artist

Fig. 1: 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

Fig. 2: 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

Fig 3: Jacolby Satterwhite. *We Are in Hell When We Hurt Each Other*, 2020. Digitally animated video; 24 min., 22 sec. Courtesy of the artist, Morán Morán Gallery, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery. Image courtesy of the artist and Morán Morán

Fig. 4: Katja Loher. *A Dialogue with the Microcosmos*, 2024. Video played on video screen embedded in white acrylic case with hand-blown glass sculptures; 16 × 23 × 8 in.; 8 min., 8 sec. (looped). Courtesy of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist

Fig. 5: 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, gel medium; 406 × 72–144 (variable) × 108 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Saya Woolfalk. Image courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects. Photo: Etienne Frossard

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