

**PRETERNATURAL**

Curated by Celina Jeffery, Canadian Museum of Nature (9 December 2011–4 March 2012), St. Brigid's Centre for the Arts (10 December 2011–17 February 2012), and Patrick Mikhail Gallery (4 January–7 February 2012), Ottawa

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The preternatural is an intriguing if elusive concept for an exhibition. Understood as a condition 'between the supernatural and the habitual patterns of the world', the preternatural in art relates to nature in ways that exceed the categorical thinking endorsed by scientific understanding and the strictures of theology (Jeffery 2011: 2). Ottawa-based curator Celina Jeffery has selected a natural history museum, a deconsecrated Catholic church, and a commercial gallery in a strip mall as installation sites for this innovative project involving eight international artists. The choices are strategic. Each venue offers a specific framework for considering the indeterminacy of the preternatural as a form of aberrant perception, beyond the Kantian notion of the world 'as is'. Such a turning away from the pressures of validation exerted by science and religion, as Rei Terada proposes, insists upon the value of the ephemeral, the perceptually marginal, and the sublime (2009: 3–7).

Five of the artists in *Preternatural* are presented in the Canadian Museum of Nature, a Beaux-Arts and Tudor-style heritage site originally built in 1910 to house Canada's Geological Survey and National Museums. Occupying a large gallery separate from the museum's natural history displays, *Preternatural* departs from previous exhibitions in the museum's recently launched Nature Art program through its 'subversions of the natural world' (Jeffery 2011: 1), employing various strategies to make strange the institution's modes of presentation.

Andrew Wright's photographs of Baffin Island differ radically from the conventions in *Awesome Arctic*, a concurrent show of field photographs from Museum expeditions. The four Chromira Lightjet prints in *Nox Borealis* (2011), mounted on plywood panels, are paired to form two views of the Arctic expanse, utterly defamiliarized through the inversion of the image so that the orientation of inky, black sky and pale, snowy terrain are reversed. The interruption and distortion of the image across curved panels, like wet photos hung to dry and rigidified, furthers this disorienting effect. In denying the viewer the assurance of the panoramic or dioramic view, *Nox Borealis* registers estrangement from an environment both threatening and imperiled.

Where Wright counters the transparency of nature photography in the Museum with intimations of the sublime, Anne Katrine Senstad exceeds the authoritative claims of didactic video. *The Sugarcane Labyrinth* (2011) documents a collaborative land project in Theriot, Louisiana that used the local staple of sugarcane, freighted with historical associations and hopes for sustainable recovery, to create a labyrinth. The hand-held camera navigates the bewildering network of paths in a disorienting fashion

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enhanced by a sinister soundtrack by J. G. Thirlwell. The music works well to suggest a latent threat, vacillating between moments of emergent hope and the fear of being perpetually lost, while local instrumental and fauna sounds evoke meanings beyond what the camera can make visible.

Marie-Jeanne Musiol's *The Radiant Forest Energy* (2011) most successfully brings together the Museum's conventions of instructive display with techniques of knowledge unsanctioned by science. Musiol uses Kirlian photography to make invisible phenomena perceptible. This electro-magnetic process captures in the contact print otherwise undetectable fields emanating from plants to register energy emissions as a function of their physical status. The resulting radiant herbarium is arranged here like a series of botanical specimens. The accompanying video makes a bold proposal: these light radiant fields enfold a mirror image of the cosmos. Enhanced by J. Mark Seck's subtly suggestive soundtrack, the camera zooms in on 'flaming' leaves whose flickering emanations do look remarkably like celestial bodies in the night sky. The persuasive beauty of Musiol's parascientific deployment of Kirlian photography conveys a desire to believe in accounts of the phenomenal world beyond existing scientific recognition – an impulse at the heart of the preternatural.

Adrian Göllner's installation similarly engages a desire for knowledge of the ineffable within the context of St. Brigid's Centre for the Arts, a Catholic church deconsecrated in 2006 that is redolent with past celebrations of the Eucharist and the miracle of transubstantiation. Built in 1890 to serve the largely Irish anglophone parish in Ottawa's historic Lowertown and partially restored since its reincarnation as a cultural centre, St. Brigid's incorporates an eclectic mix of Medieval revival architecture and Art Nouveau interior décor. Göllner focusses on the building's architecture in *Handel's Cloud* (2011), a ten-minute performance where concealed fire extinguishers abruptly discharge downwards through the pendants of the Tudor-style vaults. Observers are briefed in advance of what is technically about to happen. However, the timing of this visually ephemeral but sonically resonant display, dramatically illuminated via the stained glass windows of the aisle, is determined by the score of Handel's *Messiah* in ways that remain opaque to the observer. The anticipation and response bring the audience together, not in rapt worship, but as witnesses to a visual spectacle reminiscent of sacred apparitions in art. Göllner detaches aesthetic value from religious ritual in a way that recalls the wondrous interplay of sound and pageantry in St. Brigid's previous ecclesiastic incarnation, offering a meditation on the miraculous that might confer meaning on human existence beyond the monopoly of organized religions.

Such aspirations might seem misplaced at Patrick Mikhail's commercial gallery, located in an obscure strip mall in the city's south end sandwiched between Italian and Thai restaurants. Within this emphatically secular context of material consumption, Shin Il Kim's video triptych *Invisible Masterpiece* (2004) foregrounds the spectator of art with a certain irony. His stop-action animation employs hundreds of pressed line drawings on paper derived from photographs of visitors as they contemplate various gallery installations at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. With the removal of the art objects and their attendant cultural and monetary value, the minute shifts of line in these silhouetted figures, seemingly afloat in white space, achieve an acute

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awareness of the body's disposition in the process of looking, oscillating between Kantian attunement and the transcendence of Zen meditation.

*Preternatural* affirms the persistence of human longing for the marvelous in an experience of the natural world unfettered by materialism or institutionalized knowledge. Within each of these three locations, art becomes most subversive when it invites a harder look within the anticipation of enlightenment.

**References**

- Jeffery, Celina (2011), *Preternatural*, Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books.  
Terada, Rei (2009), *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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