

## Is This Planet Earth?

The exhibition 'Is This Planet Earth?' brings together wilderness worlds created by artists. Via sculpture, painting, sound-art, performance art and video, we encounter wild creatures and remote landscapes – yet, every colour and sensation is heightened and surreal. We are in the presence of nature, but mediated by all kinds of technology and artifice, and seen through the prism of the imagination.

But suppose that this artificial re-creation of nature is now necessary. What if life on earth, eradicated by global warming, mass-extinction and contamination, has become just a memory? Experience this exhibition, if you will, as an offering to aliens. They visit us in the future – but arrive too late to see nature in reality.

Landscape paintings by **Dan Hays** have been created from digital photographs or webcam footage from the internet. The artist will select an image – in many cases preferring one that is hazy or over-exposed or glitch-ridden – and process this, he explains, according to the digital formats of “different TV screens as they have been developed”. Layers of slightly incompatible data are then rendered as tiny oil paint ‘pixels’ on canvas, such that the colours and marks “almost cancel each other out”. In spite of this artificiality, or perhaps mysteriously because of it, the resulting work has an astonishing veracity and life. *The Walk to the Paradise Garden* (2017) pitches us into a dazzling autumnal scene, using myriad horizontal and vertical lines that dart across a grid of squares. It is as if something technological and cyborgian – possibly even emotional – has been harnessed, bringing us this strangely vivid encounter with some trees.

In *Sea of Glass* (2008) **Seán Vicary** animates footage he shot in breezy and sunny West Wales, at the point where sea meets land. It is immediately very strange. There is a massing of limpet shells, seen in a rapid, animated sequence; they seem to shimmy in a kind of expressive performance. But what if their patterns and shapes have always, unknown to us, been a form of coded communication? In a similar way, the expressive potential of crab carapaces is revealed, again through the use of stop-motion. What has made them so flustered and irascible? How long have they felt like this? The artist talks about his “sense of places crying for consideration of deep time” – that is, a time well before humans evolved. He speaks too of his involvement with animation as a form of wizardry and animistic magic.

*Sea of Glass* is futuristic, too. Seán Vicary himself puts forward the idea that the seashells that rotate just above the water’s edge are visiting spaceships – and with their magnificent architectures, they might just be the kind of structures that advanced alien life forms would create. Might the imagined alien visitors to ‘Is This Planet Earth?’ arrive in something like this?

Sculptor **Alfie Strong** provides a pile of tapestry-covered cushions, called *Sizzling Lake* (2018): we can sit on them and watch Seán Vicary’s film. Within the warp and weft there are photographic images of a plasticine and

cardboard model of a landscape made by the artist. There are rocks we might perch on while peering into rock-pools; areas of water and vegetation are depicted, too. However, the rocks are bare and arid with red shadows, the water is navy, and the plants are desiccated and drained of colour. All of it alludes, perhaps, to runaway climate change.<sup>i</sup> Strangely for tapestry, it's high-tech and hyped-up, with dot-screen effects and colour separations. These soft furnishings, in their incongruity, seem to speak of the casual recklessness with which we live on Earth. As social activist Naomi Klein writes,

It is a mentality that says we can take and keep taking without limit and never give back, one that inevitably obstructs natural cycles of renewal.<sup>ii</sup>

**Katherine Reekie's** *Bio Specimens* is a series of oil paintings begun in 2009 and inspired by a visit to Charles Darwin's house. We see laboratory vessels and specimen trays, and inside them are the most curious creatures. Children's TV character-toys have assimilated animal and vegetable DNA, and different forms of living things have intermingled: fungi and seaweeds eyeball us through the glass; there's a bird with insect limbs. It's reminiscent of H.G. Wells' 1896 science fiction novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, but while in that story, monstrous life is unleashed, the bottled specimens in Katherine Reekie's paintings have been stoppered up forever. Are they the final, mangled life forms on earth, displayed in the last, laboratory-style wilderness? In these darkly humorous works, nature's essential mechanisms (both Darwinian evolution and the cycles of renewal of which Klein speaks) have gone spectacularly awry.

**Halina Dominska's** kinetic sculpture *Bound to* conjures with a surreal, botanic life form. Sprouting from a membrane overhead are fern-fronds or flower stamens, which hang down at head-height and 'breathe' as we approach and 'pant' with anxiety as we get closer. As fantasy plant life that's capable of feelings (not so distant from recent scientific speculation), *Bound to* questions our sense of being distinctive from other life forms. By extension, it challenges, too, our sense of entitlement as a species, described by Naomi Klein as "extractivism, a violent relationship to the planet based on dominance".<sup>iii</sup>

At the same time, the pods in *Bound to* have the pinkness and texture of inside the human mouth, or some other part of our bodies where microbial ecosystems are on and in us. As described by author and activist Michael Pollan, there are

...bacteria, which number around 100 trillion... living (and dying) right now on the surface of my skin, on my tongue and deep in the coils of my intestines, where the largest contingent of them will be found... a vast, largely uncharted interior wilderness...<sup>iv</sup>

The exhibition 'Is This Planet Earth?' is a work of science fiction. It pays homage to the landscapes and creatures invented by writers and filmmakers who send up distress flares. They imagine extreme (yet in some ways plausible) scenarios in which our climate has been rendered hostile and there is human-modified, malevolent life. Supreme among these are: J.G. Ballard's

novel *The Drowned World* (1962), in which over-heated earth is overtaken by reptiles; John Wyndham's novel *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), in which hostile, bioengineered plants turn on humans; and the film *Silent Running* (1972, dir. Douglas Trumbull), in which the last remaining botanical life hurtles through space in a biodome. But there is another fantasy in play, of a whole other reality, entirely free of human influence; a dream of unrestricted, unending beauty. We can find this in some sci-fi films and novels, and in several of the artworks in 'Is This Planet Earth'. This is a tragic paradox, because, in the words of poet and environmentalist Wendell Berry,

We have never known what we were doing, because we have never known what we were UNdoing. We cannot know what we are doing until we know what nature would be doing if we were doing nothing.<sup>v</sup>

Beatbox artist and sound sculptor **Jason Singh's** *Mimesis III* (2018) is a three-part sound work inspired by the sounds of morning, afternoon and evening in Cheshire parkland. In the case of 'Morning', mainly hedgerow birds (blackbirds, robins, sparrows) begin, tentatively, to sing. 'Afternoon' has a watery setting, with the sounds of a babbling brook, croaking frogs and quacking ducks. 'Evening' features the swooping cry of an owl and an understory of singing frogs and dripping water. However, it turns out that *Mimesis III* offers us an entirely human-made paradise. The calls of the wild creatures were made by Jason Singh himself, in an extension of his range as a beatbox artist and using digital processing. Yet it is extraordinarily quiet and understated, becoming perhaps the kind of 'rhapsody' or 'tone of the environment' that's described by philosopher Timothy Morton as when 'discrete things... are no longer just in the background, but have been pulled into the foreground'.<sup>vi</sup>

**Helen Sear's** video work, *The Beginning and End of Things* (2015), projected on to the floor, features digitally modified film footage looking up at a canopy of beech trees in a Welsh wood. It calls to mind the bliss of lying on the ground and surrendering to nature's beauty. And nature here out-performs itself, with the image morphing rapidly before our eyes, the trunks and branches performing a fluid, hectic dance, the colours switching between postcard perfect and petrochemical, and all of it riffing without pause between seasons. Looking down on it from above, it's experienced as a viscous, pullulating pool, hallucinatory and yet reminiscent of single-celled organisms seen through a microscope. Mysterious, shadowy, residual formations dart about as well, sometimes beneath the surface, sometimes emerging from the depths. What kind of dark force is this? The title hints both at the original, primordial soup and the emergence of the first DNA, and at the very last trace of life – the single cell of recriminatory slime on the last inhabitable speck of earth.

**Salvatore Arancio** presents us with mossy growth and fungal flesh, all of it exaggerated in scale and made in lushly coloured ceramic. To create these sculptures he asked two groups – one in their twenties, the other with individuals as old as ninety<sup>vii</sup> – to take inspiration from the natural and grotesque forms found in sixteenth century Italian gardens. Together, they

made an array of upbeat vegetable forms with anthropomorphic flourishes, rolling and moulding and slapping the clay – “a material having its own life, telling you what to do, coming from nature and turning into nature again in some distorted way”. *Etchogon-S* (2015) resembles an ungainly and tragic-looking pile of dead, leafy matter, but with spatters of ochre in the glaze that suggest it’s beginning to regenerate. *Leafy Spouter* (2015) represents a teetering, comically over-sized, phallic outgrowth, on the verge of shooting its spores. With the earth’s ecological tipping-point looming, the creative imaginations behind these objects seem also, metaphorically, to be overbalancing or ‘tipping over’.

Finally, performance artist **Patrick Coyle** puts forward the idea that, at roughly the time at which aliens visit our exhibition, water has become a prized, luxury item. He conducts tours of ‘Wrecksome Flottlesam Statiom’ and ‘Abbaystwyth Flottleswyth Statith’, revered water-bottling sites near Tŷ Pawb and Aberystwyth Arts Centre, the two locations of ‘Is This Planet Earth?’. In Wrexham, radioactivity has seeped into the underground water supplies (essential to the town’s historic brewing industry), and in Aberystwyth, “radio sewage active tailings” are detected in the river Ystwyth – and yet Patrick Coyle gives an upbeat account of the ways in which people have adapted. He also marvels at how life was lived in the twenty-first century: “Here the records show ancient website rules of Park. Park was free-for-all in entry. Park you could even breathe without cash-charges, and social up against real humans in actual flesh-to-flesh time.” It’s clear that in the time since then, human speech and behaviour have undergone profound change, and the fundamentals of nature, air and water, have become fraught and scarce.

But we must leave this exhibition that’s intended for alien visitors. Back in real life, the question is: can we channel artworks such as these, with their various appeals to our creative unconscious<sup>viii</sup>, to bring about radical change in ourselves<sup>x</sup> – as this planet’s supreme consumers and polluters?

Angela Kingston, curator of 'Is This Planet Earth?'

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.livescience.com/59693-could-earth-turn-into-venus.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Naomi Klein (b. 1970), <http://greattransition.org/publication/climate-the-crisis-and-the-movement>, 2014, see also *This Changes Everything: capitalism vs. the climate*, 2014

<sup>iii</sup> <http://greattransition.org/publication/climate-the-crisis-and-the-movement>, 2014

<sup>iv</sup> Michael Pollan (b. 1955), *The New York Times*, 2013, see also *The Botany of Desire*, 2001

<sup>v</sup> Wendell Berry (b. 1934), see also *Our Only World: ten essays*, 2015

<sup>vi</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, 2007, p. 57

<sup>vii</sup> Salvatore Arancio created this work during his ceramics fellowship at Camden Arts Centre, London, with students from the centre’s ceramics courses and the Slade School of Fine Art.

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viii 'Creative unconscious', also known as active imagination, is a Jungian theory pertaining to opening up a dialogue with the unconscious in order to trigger a shift in how the conscious and unconscious minds work together.

<sup>ix</sup> See, for example, *How art challenges us to consider the human future*, Lori B. Andrews, 2009, *The Influence of Imagination: essays on science fiction and fantasy as agents of social change*, eds. Lee Easton and Randy Schroeder, 2008, and *Green Speculations, Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism*, Eric C. Otto, 2012