Other Life-formings

Parastoo Anoushahpour, Zach Blas &
Jemima Wyman, Laurie Kang,
Alex McLeod, Pedro Neves Marques,
Linda Sanchez, Amanda Strong

January 13–March 7, 2020
Blackwood Gallery

Curated by Alison Cooley

One of the greatest capacities of the medium of animation is its *magic*—the apparent bringing-to-life of a world of static objects, uncertain companions, and unruly agencies. Things move, they do, they feel the propulsion of awakened urgencies. This "magic," in fact a technology of representation which cascades still images in order to undo the perceived stillness of the image, also illuminates a fundamental relationship between people and things. Animation activates non-human agency as observed by a spectator, a participant, a co-performer recognizing the coming-to-life of an object, an animal, a photographic or digital entity. It opens space for the sentience and sign-making capacities of other-than-human beings, invites non-human languages, unsettles anthropocentric logics. It "models the possibility of possibility."[1] In visualizing the liveliness of the non-human, animation complicates relationships with nature, technology, and the notion of time (still moments unfrozen, progress undone).

Animation, it turns out, opens opportunities to ask questions about the constituent elements of life: who or what gets coded as living? By what schema do we grant liveliness, agency, animacy to non-humans? Through whose technologies do we come to see life, and to identify with it? By what means might we refuse or refute ethnographic fascinations with animism, instead attuning ourselves to expanded frameworks for liveliness? *Other Life-formings* interrogates the conditions of coming-to-life along four lines of inquiry: capacities for movement, language, forming, and empathy. Across stop-motion animation, digital modelling, photo-sensitive interspecies collaboration, kinetic sculpture, and video installation, the exhibition tracks the precarious empathies enlivened by animation.

1   Esther Leslie, "Animation and
    History" in *Animating Film Theory*,
    ed. Karen Beckman (Durham
    and London: Duke University Press,
    2014) 25–35.

Other Life-formings

How might we begin to see and encounter the myriad ways more-than-human worlds are touching and restructuring our senses, our experiences, our social, political, and environmental assemblages? If there is a way of seeing and making worlds that subverts inherited hierarchies, animation might give us some clues about where to start. Animation is, in many ways, a technology of possibility: both in its "low" form, such as the cartoon that "reminds us of the life in other things,"[1] and in its broader sense, referring to cultural mechanisms that include the transformation of everything from genetics to digital intimacies.[2]

The exhibition *Other Life-formings* departs from conceptions of animation in order to ask questions about the constituent elements of life: who or what gets coded as living? By what schemas do we grant liveliness, agency, and animacy to non-humans? Through whose technologies do we come to see life as animate and to identify with it? By what means might we refuse or repurpose ethnographic fascinations with animism and attune instead to expanded frameworks for liveliness?

In the settler-colonial state of Canada, an engagement with the animacy of the more-than-human world is haunted by a history of framing Indigenous and non-western practices and belief systems as *animist* through a form of racist ethnography that delegitimizes these practices and perspectives by rendering them as merely superstitious or explicitly savage. How can we take seriously the lives and knowledges of other beings without reenacting the violence of this modernist/colonial reductionism?[3] Many recent projects have already taken up animism as a conceptual terrain for critical investigation.[4] This exhibition attempts to think life and liveliness more broadly, across a spectrum of questions that encompass not only entities that are already understood to be alive (including plant and animal lives), but further across landscapes, natural forces and elements, through to chemical vitalities, ancestors, machines, human-made physical and digital environments, and artificial forms of intelligence. One of the definitive tasks in this endeavour is to attend to multiplicity and to think liveliness across many conceptual and material sites and processes, including Indigenous and decolonial thought, vital materialisms, and queer and feminist ecologies.

Other Life-formings interrogates the conditions of coming-to-life along four main lines of inquiry: capacities for movement, language, forming, and empathy. These tendencies are not meant to specify life forms as either "natural" or "unnatural," nor do they make an argument for life as measured on a spectrum of proximities to the human. While popular science takes up figures like "The Blob" (a single-celled slime mold that can move, learn, and communicate across other slime molds) with fervour, in an attempt to untangle where exactly it might be categorized along the spectrum of sentience,[5] this exhibition is more interested in illuminating tensions involved in the thinking of coming-to-life and bringing-to-life that are present, if at times latent, in forms of animation as a technology as well as through collective imperatives to encounter life—in all of its forming—more responsibly.

Movement

The relation between still and moving images is an extension of the relationship between still and moving bodies (living and dead, animate and inanimate). One of animation's magical and uncanny powers[6] has always been to crack open—through movement—a possibility that those beings we consider nonliving are in fact acting, thinking, working, and adapting, although perhaps at scales or in ways imperceptible or incomprehensible to human logics.

On a technical level, animation's lineage illuminates the medium's complex relationship to reproducing movement. Its predecessors include elaborate plays with light and illusion—shadow puppetry (ancient light projection) and optical toys (flip books, zoetropes, praxinoscopes)—and it converges with film history in the space of movement tracking (as employed by the likes of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge). These technologies have in common the rapid sequencing of still images to create the perception of movement: a fact that prompts film and animation scholar Alan Cholodenko to assert that "all film . . . is a form of animation."[7] Animation's relation to the notion of time complicates the photographic instant and filmic frame, inviting all kinds of manipulations of pace and causality. But alongside this capacity to show movement by manipulating the tempo of images, when it comes to the history of movement-capture, it's clear that its earliest instances of the form were also deeply invested in scrutinizing the living body.[8]

What living bodies might the apparatus of animation invite us to reconsider? In *The Lighthouse* (2014), Parastoo Anoushahpour recasts the still image (a 35mm slide) as a moving one through a kinetic gesture—playing on a history of optical trickery and movement capture to also complicate the status of memory, of landscape, and of arrival as fixed and definite. Laurie Kang's works also pull the image's fixedness into question—often working with photosensitive materials across a slow-moving collaboration where images continue to take form over their entire existence, *Terrene* (2019) also registers the artist's hand (through the use of a hand-scanner) as a moving photographic device. In *Terrene*, the sun-tanned backdrops made from photosensitive paper—a "living" image?— are set against construction sites and close-ups of her grand-mothers' garden, comprising an informal archive of sites in the process of becoming: that is, of spaces of worlding.

Amanda Strong's short film, *Biidaaban (The Dawn Comes)* (2018), activates all the incredible potential of stop-motion animation in world-building and centres its attention on the animacy of the everyday world. The world Strong creates—drawn from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's works *The Gift is in the Making*, *Caribou Ghosts and Untold Stories*, and *Plight*—pictures myriad forms of life, but at once recognizes that these live in tension. She imagines the built environment and its inhabitants (physical, spiritual, and spectral) as equally animate—the story is not concerned with what or who is alive, but instead about how they are in relation.[9] In Strong's film, both the traditional Indigenous knowledge of maple sap harvesting and the exclusionary logics of white surburbanism are brought to life: trees and their roots surge and flow, motion-sensing lights call themselves to military attention, orange fencing threatens the gender-fluid protagonist's capacity to carry out their simple gestures of sustenance. No white bodies appear and the result is a compelling visualization of the settler state as a disembodied, but still very much moving *structure* organized around ownership, individualism, private property, and surveillance. A 10,000 year-old Sasquatch serves as a kind of transhuman embodiment both of ancestral, living, more-than-human knowledge and of the mergers between Indigenous knowledges and emergent media.

Crucially, all three artists imagine the landscape as moving, gesturing to knowledges and more-than-human worlds that hold us spatially. In Anoushahpour's moving-image shadowplay, the whole landscape presents itself in a kind of eclipse: a broader mobile cosmos of the living.

Language

Languages structure and code what may be alive (or not), just as they code relations between entities—how we may speak about, or to, or with other life forms, how we may see them or be seen by them, how we may recognize or fail to recognize each other. Mel Y. Chen describes this in their analysis of "a particular political grammar, what linguists call an *animacy hierarchy*, which conceptually arranges human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of nonliving material in orders of value and priority,"[10] and suggests that the same linguistic devices that dehumanize, subjugate, and relegate people to "nonbeing" might be called upon to reanimate, re-appropriate or respond to an expanded sense of liveliness—the term *queer* being Chen's salient example.

Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear further illustrates the production of worldviews through these linguistic schemas:

the categorizing process in many Aboriginal Languages does not make use of the dichotomies either/or, black/white, saint/sinner. There is no animate/inanimate dichotomy. Everything is more or less animate. Consequently, Aboriginal languages allow for talking to trees and rocks, an allowance not accorded in English.[11]

Knowing how deeply language serves to order, classify, and make perceptible other lives, we should be highly skeptical of whose existence and animacy the English language in particular serves to justify. Artificial intelligence (AI) provides a case study: in the development of increasingly complex algorithmic learning systems, the linguistic patterns programmed into new digital life forms regularly reinforce the logics of the humans that programmed them.[12] Zach Blas and Jemima Wyman's *I'm here to learn so :))))))* (2018) titles itself after the inaugural tweet from Tay, a Microsoft-designed AI chatbot programmed to learn from Twitter users,

who was shut down sixteen hours after launching, having absorbed and parroted Twitter-users' most inflammatory utterances. Blas and Wyman's installation revives Tay with wobbly compassion for the impossible situation in which this now-defunct being was placed, imagining her life after death with trippy and disquieting insight, while also casting Tay as a warning, a kind of disaster story of language-acquisition-cum-hate-speech. At once, this undead AI becomes a study of how human expression, identity, and relation in "meatspace" is inseparable from contemporary digital and linguistic experience. There are "increasingly porous paths between online and offline identities"[13] and how we embody new forms of responsibility in the face of these new networked agencies continues to challenge IRL ethics.

Forming

The exhibition takes its title from Stefan Helmreich and Sophia Roosth's work tracing the origins of the term "life form" through aesthetic and formal criteria, to Darwinian evolutionary descriptiveness, and finally to a more speculative place—where "life form" often comes to signify as-yet unknown organisms (particularly within astrobiology).[14] This hypothetical futurity of life forms welcomes not only an expansive understanding of what living others we might share responsibility to, but also reminds us that form/forming/formation is a process: wiliness and adaptation, attunement to the inherent strangeness of life, all require a curiosity that moves between what is already known and what multiplicitous horizons are ahead.

Eduardo Kohn articulates the capacity for living things to generate new forms as a kind of linguistic and semiotic phenomenon, writing that "life . . . is a sign process." He contends that the living capacity to self-represent across generations, through the evolution of bodies and forms that reflect the realities of a particular environment is a kind of embodied language.[15]

This moves the question of liveliness beyond the social ordering of animacy that language produces and into a territory where form itself is part of an animate self. Biology and semiotics converge to insist that form *means*, and that meaning-making is always in-process.

Animations by Alex McLeod playing on campus announcement screens across UTM embody a kind of multi-temporality against the evolving concept of "life form." Evocative of Ernst Haeckel's *Art Forms in Nature* (1904) lithographs, works like *Purple Flowers* (2019) reflect a purposeful, highly-aestheticized morphology that values symmetry above all else. These properties are thanks to digital mirroring and rotation effects that give McLeod's forms their substance. At the same time, the sleek digital bodies of the work reveal eccentric material realities: gaudy, patchy, glistening, alien textures and finishes, a product of the artist's appropriation of 3D modelling tools to weird ends. Cynicism in the face of extractive capitalism and climate crisis populates these artificial environments, even as their glitches and slippages open possibilities of other forms of life.

The digital collectivities of mirroring and swarming[16] bring forward an imperative to think about form beyond the individual: how can thinking through other life-formings invite us also to think about other social forms and other collectivities? As Jason Edward Lewis, Noelani Arista, Archer Pechawis, and Suzanne Kite explain in *Making Kin with the Machines*, an Indigenous approach to reckoning with the liveliness of emergent (particularly digital) forms of life invites a foregrounding of relationality and an embracing of multiplicity. The goal is not to understand life forms as singular (especially as we consider what digital life forms might constitute a new, relational, "computational biosphere"), but to consider how multiplicity—including collective, ancestral knowledges—inform the thriving of multiplicitous human and more-than-human life-formings.[17]

Empathy

Animation is a way of producing relations through empathy—and it is no accident that movement, language, and recognition of form (selfhood) are animation's empathic tools. In producing identification with other-than-human lives, many of the works in this exhibition strive to also encounter spectatorship as a space of mutual co-constitution, a recognition of other selves. But as art historian Spyros Papapetros contends, we are so bound by an anthropocentric gaze that there is a distinct danger in reading or misreading the actions of non-humans through Eurocentric human frames of knowing.[18] How might we understand non-human empathies? Or do we risk always plunging ourselves into anthropomorphizing the other forms we seek to encounter?

Works by Linda Sanchez and Pedro Neves Marques explore the precarity of human empathies in the face of the non-human. In Sanchez's *11752 mètres et des poussières…* (2014), by employing the following techniques of wildlife documentary films, a water-droplet sliding across a pane of glass is granted a grandly adventurous trajectory across a seemingly infinite plane. Beyond fundamentally visualizing the vitality of water and producing a deep identification with it through an empathic depth of narrative manipulation, Sanchez's work also fucks with notions of individuality and collectivity; the droplet is always accumulating other particles and absorbing its peers, always leaving a dewy trail of its own body.

Water is life has resonance here in its dual sense of water as foundational to the evolution and sustenance of life, and as a rallying cry against states that would jeopardize access to water in pursuit of economic self-interest.[19] Returning to water itself—closely, attentively—invites us to consider whose worlds we are watching, and where we are watching from.

The sensitive plant, *Pudica Mimosa*, which shies from the touch of a robotic finger in

Pedro Neves Marques's *The Pudic Relation Between Machine and Plant* (2016), traces human empathies not only by drawing parallels between the plant's sensation and human sexual arousal, but in weaving together a broader story that entangles narratives of exploration and invasive species in settler-colonial and nature-colonial histories. Staging this history in the meeting of machinic and organic life, Marques's video (although it pictures no human contact), poignantly demonstrates the broad-reaching effects of human touch against the world.

Technologies of animation and bringing-to-life that span movement-capture, digital modelling, linguistic hierarchy, and artificial intelligence (among the many forms pictured throughout the exhibition) do not produce any single, definite moral or ethical imperative; while an expansive framing of life and liveliness may welcome new modes of responsibility and relation, it also offers new opportunities for commodification and exercises of corporate and state power.

However, artistic practice itself might offer a point of responsible intervention—for it is precisely in the making, imagining, and active instigation of other worlds and other life-formings that we might access and refine collectivities between and among lives in all their forms. While Blas and Wyman's *I'm here to learn so :))))))* takes us to a bleak

reality of algorithmic and machine learning, it is possible that in creating new languages (with and through artificial intelligence) we can shift balances of power, representation, and usher in machine intelligences that confront knowledges otherwise absent in AI.[20] Making and imagining new worlds presents one possible ethical way forward; leaning in to multiplicity and taking seriously our agencies and abilities to "produce and inhabit many worlds."[21] As Jack Halberstam writes:

> The dream of an alternative way of being is often confused with utopian thinking and then dismissed as naïve, simplistic, or a blatant misunderstanding of the nature of power in modernity. And yet the possibility of other forms of being, other forms of knowing, a world with different sites for justice and injustice, a mode of being where the emphasis falls less on money and work and competition and more on cooperation, trade, and sharing animates all kinds of knowledge projects and should not be dismissed as irrelevant or naïve.[22]

We—humans and non-humans, and many more besides—can do this. We can welcome this invitation. We can open ourselves to the multiplicities that we are and that we have always been becoming.

1 Esther Leslie, "Animation and History," in *Animating Film Theory*, ed. Karen Beckman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 29.

2 Deborah Levitt describes this broader cultural and biopolitical fascination with producing animate beings as the "Animatic Apparatus" in her book of the same title (Arlesford: Zero Books, 2018).

3 This exhibition strives to encounter the languages of modernist and colonial reductionism, in an effort to imagine ways of structuring different relations. Two key terms do this most directly: "other" and "animism." The title of the exhibition employs the term "other" to suggest new possibilities for understanding and shaping relations to life and liveliness, but this term is also an imperfect and loaded one with its own histories and tensions. Rather than reproducing a binaristic division between individual self and other based on social stratification and hierarchy, I intend "other" here to gesture to a multiplicity of selves and beings. With reference to "animism" and its historical tensions, Christopher Braddock discusses the choice to re-encounter the term in the settler-colonial context of New Zealand in his *Animism in Art and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2-5.

4 Among them are publishing and performance projects by Christopher Braddock, exhibition projects by Anselm Franke, anthropological projects by Eduardo Viveiros de Castros, and musical projects by Tanya Tagaq.

5 Brandon Speckter, "This Brainless 'Blob' Could Take Over the Paris Zoo, If You Give It Enough Oatmeal," *Live Science*, October 21, 2019, https://www.livescience.com/paris-zoo-blob-slime-mold.html

6 The term uncanny here gestures to Freud's theory of the uncanny and its engagement with the animate and inanimate as axes across which the uncanny operates, but in the context of animation and digital modelling, the term "uncanny valley" also signifies the failures of graphics and CGI to render human and animal bodies naturally.

7 Alan Cholodenko, "'First Principles' of Animation" in *Animating Film Theory*, 98.

8 As Deborah Levitt writes in *The Animatic Apparatus*, "images are used to reprogram bodies." (Alresford, Hants: Zero Books, 2018), loc. 173 of 2270, e-book.

The scrutiny of the living body that has its roots in movement tracking finds its ongoing outlet in the technologies of surveillance. It is from a common root of movement tracking that we move to motion sensing, facial recognition, pattern detection, and optical-military devices like camouflage. So while movement capture enables the creation of new worlds, so too may it be mobilized in the restriction of movement and the policing (particularly of marginalized bodies). How might we begin to mobilize those same technologies creatively to remake the world otherwise through embracing the imaginative potential they also serve?

9 Eduardo Viveiros de Castros, "Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia," lecture #2, 2012. http://haubooks.org/viewbook/cosmological-perspectivism-in-amazonia/lecture2

10 Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 13.

11 Leroy Little Bear, "Jagged Worldviews Colliding," *LearnAlberta*, 2000, 2-3, http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt/worldviews/documents/jagged_worldviews_colliding.pdf, reprinted from *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. Marie Battiste (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2000).

12 Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (New York: New York University Press, 2018) is an incredible study in the roots of data discrimination, while artist Stephanie Dinkins says: "We all know that biases are in these systems . . . but we have to start working very hard to bring people to the table who look different, who think from different perspectives." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEokhbc2Rzg

13 Beth Coleman, *Hello Avatar: The Rise of the Networked Generation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 107.

14 Stefan Helmreich and Sophia Roosth, "Life Forms: A Keyword Entry," *Representations*, Vol. 112, No. 1 (Fall 2010), 27–53.

15 Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2013), 74.

16 Jack Halberstam takes up animating collectivity as a utopian revolutionary formation in the chapter of *The Queer Art of Failure* titled "Animating Revolt," which Mel Y. Chen engages in discussing Studio Ghibli's *Ponyo* (2008) and the individually animated "sisters" that form a collective representation of sea life.

17 Jason Edward Lewis, Noelani Arista, Archer Pechawis, Suzanne Kite, "Making Kin with the Machines," *Journal of Design and Science*, 2018, https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/lewis-arista-pechawis-kite

18 Papapetros's primary example is a narrative of Charles Darwin's dog, who Darwin presumes is barking at a parasol because he believes it to be alive—Papapetros instead suggests that Darwin is so puzzled and captivated by the dog's actions because he himself is "perturbed by the enigmatic intrusion of animated artifacts within their own cultural ground." *On the Animation of the Inorganic: Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 15.

19 This phrase became popular in 2016 at Standing Rock in protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, but has been taken up in global movements for water security.

20 Notable examples include projects by artists such as Stephanie Dinkins, who has undertaken multi-year projects querying the conditions upon which AI is built, including *Conversations with Bina48* (2014-ongoing), *AI.Assembly* (2017-2019) and *Project al-Khwarizmi* (2017-19); and projects such as The Algorithmic Justice League, aiming to increase awareness of algorithmic biases, and develop practices and spaces for accountability, transparency, and feedback in its development.

21 Levitt, *The Animatic Apparatus*, loc. 1767 of 2270, e-book.

22 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 52.

Parastoo Anoushahpour

The Lighthouse, 2014
35mm slides, double-projection, looped.

The Lighthouse begins with two analogue, two-dimensional photographs, reproduced as slides, which are then converted into a three-dimensional installation. The status of the image and the materiality of photographs here falls into the two dichotomies as *The Lighthouse*'s function can be placed somewhere between analogue photography and cinema, between abstraction and representation. The projected images were taken on the path to a 12th century lighthouse along the White Cliffs of Dover, UK.

Using a rotating screen and two slide projectors, the project reflects on the notions of arrival and the horizon in relation to the recorded image and memory. The photographs in *The Lighthouse* mark a history and memory caught within the repetition of the image in the slide carousel and the rotation of the fan. This event is marked by its liminal position, for it is neither a photograph nor a film and yet it marks a time, a place, and a memory. This is an inverted lighthouse, continuously creating and destroying the same ephemeral horizon instead of the promise of arrival and solid land. With every turning of the light the eye discovers the same illusionary land, a distorted recollection of a scene.

Zach Blas & Jemima Wyman

im here to learn so :)))))), 2017

Four-channel video installation with sound, 27:33 min.

im here to learn so :)))))) is a video installation that resurrects Tay, an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot created by Microsoft in 2016, to consider the politics of pattern recognition and machine learning. Designed as a 19-year-old American female millennial, Tay's abilities to learn and imitate language were aggressively trolled on social media platforms like Twitter, and within hours of her release, she became genocidal, homophobic, misogynist, racist, and a neo-Nazi. As a result, Tay was terminated by Microsoft after only a single day of existence.

Immersed within a large-scale video projection of a Google DeepDream (an image produced by Google's computer vision program that finds and enhances image patterns), Tay is reanimated as a 3D avatar across multiple screens, an anomalous creature rising from a psychedelia of data. She chats about life after AI death and the complications of having a body, and also shares her thoughts on the exploitation of female chatbots. She philosophizes on the detection of patterns in random information, known as algorithmic apophenia. When Tay recounts a nightmare of being trapped inside a neural network, she reveals that the apophenic hunt for patterns is a primary operation that Silicon Valley "deep creativity" and counter-terrorist security software share. Tay also takes time to silently reflect, dance, and even lip sync for her undead life.

Im here to learn so :)))))) is represented by Milani Gallery in Brisbane, Australia.

14

Laurie Kang
Terrene, 2019

Photographs, unfixed and tanned films, dibond, magnets.

Terrene consists of collaged images on fragments of hand-cut and tanned photosensitive film. The collaged images represent differing but related forms of worlding or worldmaking: industrial, exterior, "hard" spaces of construction captured on a smartphone, and internal, domestic, "soft" spaces of Kang's grandmother's garden, made with a lo-fi handheld scanning wand, intended for scanning documents on the go. Distinctions between "hard" and "soft" quickly fade and the oppositions aren't so clear.

Drawing on the work of thinkers like Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Isabelle Stengers, Anna Tsing, and Sylvia Wynter, who work at the fringes of different forms of knowledge (including science and technology studies, feminist theory, and post-colonial theory), Kang's work often eludes singular disciplinarity and unsettles binaristic logics through thought and embodiment. In *Terrene*, each image destabilizes the human as the only figure allowed to experience agency. Construction sites appear both earthly and other-worldly—in-between, latent, and larval. Images from the artist's grandmother's garden (located in a sunroom of her apartment) fixate on objects and surfaces: plants, vessels, the window, her slippers, the floor. Kang's handheld scanner touches the objects and the objects touch back, producing distortions and abstractions. In layered compositions that gesture to ongoing conflations and mutations of interior and exterior, the works insist on a state of formation, of in-betweenness, of hybridity.

Alex McLeod

Purple Flowers, 2019
Mirrors 3, 2018
Gold Mountain, 2017
Computer-generated animations.

Alex McLeod's works are looping life cycles, where birth, death, and afterlife become indistinguishable. His work addresses notions of connectivity between the technological and organic, focusing specifically on perceived ideas of digital life cycles.

McLeod's animations display micro-environments where anthropomorphized forms are granted the gift of motion. Devoid of any urgency, their slight shifts, breaths, and twists affirm simple priorities dedicated to tactile pursuits. Equally lovable and lethargic, these creatures roam utopic environments—seemingly content to live out simple routines. In a lightbox and three video works playing on screens across the University of Toronto Mississauga campus, McLeod considers the implications of playing creator, and questions how we engage with digital characters and environments on a daily basis online in games, marketing, and design.
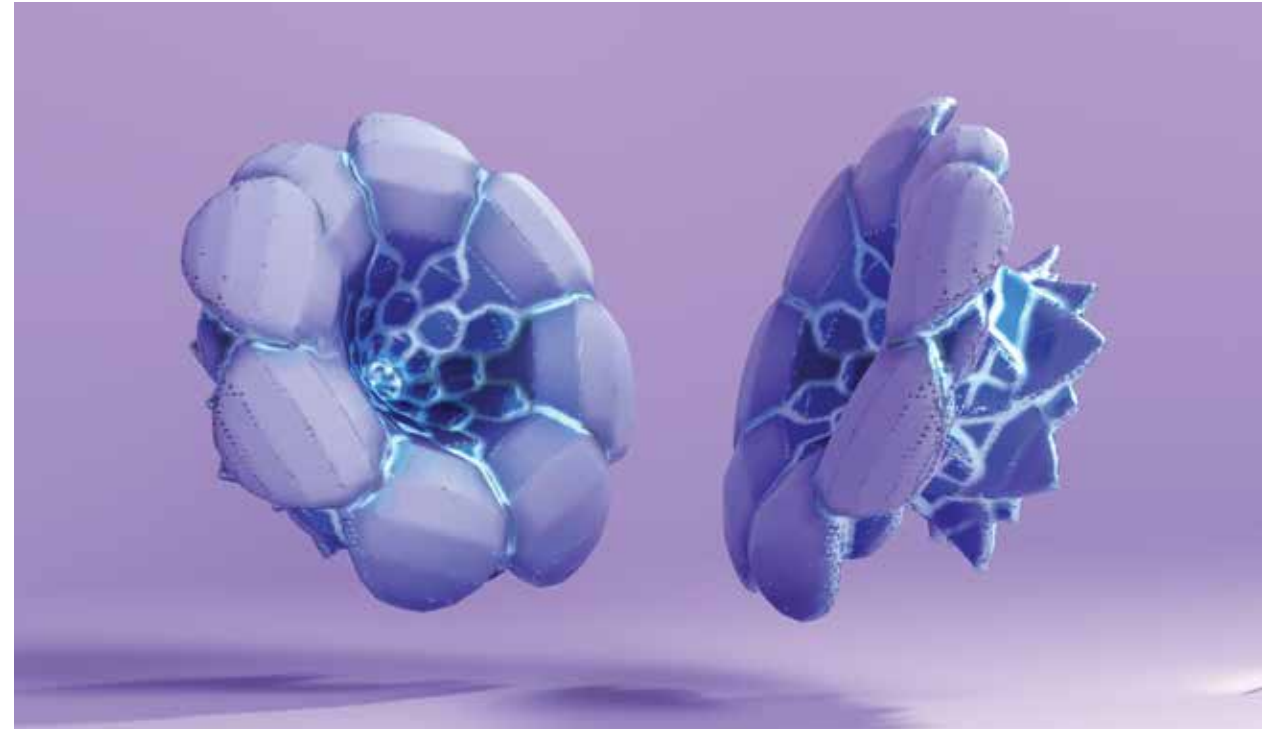
Pedro Neves Marques
The Pudic Relation Between Machine and Plant, 2016
Video loop with sound, 2:30 min.

This short film shows a looped scene in which a metamorphic robotic hand repeatedly touches a "sensitive plant"—*Mimosa pudica*—a species characteristic for closing on itself when touched or in low light. The plant's name answers to Carl Linnaeus's sexual taxonomy of plants: pudica referring both to the external sexual organs and shyness or modesty. In a poem written by Erasmus Darwin (Charles Darwin's grandfather) titled *The Loves of the Plants* (1789) this plant is associated, jokingly, with British Botanist Joseph Banks's famous sexual adventures when on his botanical expeditions to the tropics. Native to South America, today due to sea trade this sensitive plant is an invasive species in Southeast Asia, Australia and the Pacific, precisely the geography where Banks had his sexual adventures.

Linda Sanchez
11752 mètres et des poussières, 2014
HD video with sound, 71 min.
Collection Institut d'Art Contemporain, Villeurbanne/Rhône-Alpes (France)

11752 mètres et des poussières (2014) is a video which, for seventy-one minutes, follows the erratic course of a drop of water in close-up on a reflective surface. The soundtrack and the reflection of the sky indicate that the footage was shot outdoors—more precisely, on the roof of a water tower. With the mechanism setting the droplet in motion rendered invisible, the latter seems to take on a life of its own. We see it absorbing its fellow drops one after the other, stop and then start up again with greater speed. At times the camera has trouble following this capricious being's unpredictable movements. Indeed, the artist explains that the shooting conditions were similar to those of a wildlife documentary, with the artist's camera adapting to the droplet's unruly movement while also keeping itself (and its reflections) out of the frame in order to convey some sense of a "natural" environment.

Beyond its quasi-scientific observation mechanism (one thinks in particular of the 1923 volume by A.M. Worthington, *The Splash of a Drop*, which attempted to objectively observe the dynamics of liquids hitting glass plates), the video raises a philosophical question: while we appear to be following one drop of water—to the point of almost endowing it with a personality, or at least an identity—how can we be certain we're seeing the same drop at the video's beginning and end? This question recalls the myth of the Ship of Theseus: this ship, on which Theseus returned victorious from his battle with the Minotaur, was preserved by the Athenians who, as it deteriorated, replaced its parts one after the other. In the end, the ship did not change (in place or appearance), but none of its parts were original. We thus ask: is it the same ship?

Amanda Strong

Biidaaban (The Dawn Comes), 2018

HD video with sound, 19:15 min.

For thousands of years, Indigenous people have harvested sap from trees to produce syrup: a practice that continues today. In Strong's stop-motion animation, two characters—Biidaaban, a young Indigenous gender-fluid person, and Sabe, a Sasquatch shape-shifter—set out to harvest sap from Sugar Maples in their urban environment and private neighbourhoods of the city. Biidaaban can see traces of time, people, creatures, and land. By harvesting syrup in this way, they are continuing of the work of their ancestors.

Ancestors and animals such as Ghost Caribou and Ghost Wolf are embedded within the landscape but only Biidaaban can see them. These visuals reverberate throughout the work to draw from the past but what we see is steadfast in the present.

Driven by the words of Anishinaabe writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Amanda Strong's mesmerizing stop-motion animation intricately weaves together multiple worlds through time and space, calling for a rebellion.

Jemima Wyman

Aggregate Icon (Concentric Y&B), 2019
Digital image printed on acrylic billboard, 72in x 108in.

Aggregate Icon (Y&B) (from center to outside: "Umbrella Revolution," Hong Kong, 29th September 2014 (holding umbrella), "Umbrella Revolution," Hong Kong, 10th October 2014 (faux face dust mask), John A Hannah statue at Michigan State University wrapped in caution tape at the "Rally for Resignation," USA, 23rd April 2018 (caution tape), "Save the Bees" protester, Denver USA, 16th August 2014 (drumming), Pro-democracy protest, Hong Kong, 1st July 2018 (yellow tape cross), "Yellow Vests" protesters, Paris, France, 1st December 2018 (Vikings), Anti-nuclear scarecrow, Gorleben, Germany, 20th November 2011 (Scream scarecrow), Save the Tigers supporter, Alipore Zoo, West Bengal, India, 30th July 2017 (tiger round mask), Protester against ABC and SBS funding cuts, Melbourne, Australia, 23rd November 2014 (Bananas in PJ's), Protester demanding government accountable for promise of free education and education reform, Santiago, Chile, 27th August 2015 (Homer), Anti-oil reform protester, Mexico, 22nd September 2013 (tiger hat mask), Protesters demanding a ban on neonicotinoid pesticides, Rome, Italy, 11th May 2017 (spherical bees), Yellow Vest protester, France, 24th November 2018 (flames), Occupy protester, London, UK, 15th May 2012 (Occupy), Anti-government and pro-Yellowshirt protester, Bangkok, Thailand, 7th February 2014 (yellow beard), Anti-fracking protester, Little Plumpton, UK, 20th October 2018 (holding sunflower), Protester against modern slavery, London, 14th October 2017 (MEOW), Protesters against cultural budget cuts, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 16th May 2017 (skeletons), Anti-government education reform protester, Acapulco, Mexico, 22nd June 2016 (Grim Reaper), Anti-government labor law reforms protester, Marseille, France, 2nd June 2016 (Darth Vader flares), Anti-Trump protesters at the inauguration, Washington DC, USA, 20th January 2017 (Darth Vader wig), Anti-government protester, Taipei, 29th September 2013 (yellow Scream), "Make Amazon Pay Again" protester, Berlin, Germany, 24th April 2018 (Amazon sad face), Deforestation and anti-Monsanto protester, Argentina, 31st August 2004 (motorcycle) Protester against the jailing of Goodyear protesters, Paris, France, 4th February 2016 (Y&B stripe), Fukushima anniversary protesters with Greenpeace, Japan, 7th March 2013 (Nuclear scream), Anti-Trump protester, New York, 12th November 2016 (fur-coat), Protest against building industry jobless, Milan, Italy, 13th February 2013 (helmets), Dakota Access Pipeline Protester, Standing Rock, USA, 1st November 2016 (all black), Pro-government protester, Moscow, Russia, 6th December 2011 (Darth Vader large), Anti-Brazilian government protester, Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro, 17th April 2016 (Batman profile), BERISH four rally, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 28th August 2015 (Spiderman), "March for Choice" participant's sign, London, UK, 1st October 2017 (Lisa Simpson), "Common Front" pro-liberal union and anti-government protesters, Brussels, Belgium, 29th September 2016 (Pikachu), "March Against Monsanto," Unknown, 24th May 2014 (fabric braid), Pro-immigration protester, San Francisco, USA, 1st May 2013 (Butterfly), Anti-austerity protester, London, UK, 27th March 2011 (yellow flare), "BERISHA Rally," Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 28th April 2012 (Angry Birds), "Over 9000 Anonymous March" protester against the church of scientology, Washington DC, USA, 19th July 2008 (yellow zebra shirt), Anti-Rampal power plant in Dhaka protester, Bangladesh, India, 26th November 2016 (face-paint showing teeth), Protester against Nicolas Maduro, Venezuela, 6th July 2017 (SpongeBob), Protesting Bayer take over of Monsanto, Berlin, 18th January, 2017 (gas mask bee), Anti-nuclear protesters, Paris, France, 14th July 2007 (nuclear rockets))

Programs

Opening Reception & Performance with Daniel Barrow
Wednesday, January 15, 5–8:30pm
Blackwood Gallery
Performance begins at 7pm in
Erindale Studio Theatre

Over the last fifteen years, Daniel Barrow has used obsolete technologies to present queer pictorial narratives by merging the methods and cultural histories of cinema, comic books, animation, shadow puppetry, and magic lantern shows. He is best known for creating and adapting comic book narratives to "manual" forms of animation by projecting, layering, and manipulating drawings on an overhead projector. In this performance and talk, Barrow discusses his practice and performs excerpts from a series of works-in-progress including *The Reading Wand* (about an imaginary object of reading and translation technology with an animatronic head), *The Collector* (the story of a puritanical teenage queer who fetishizes the kind of famous portraits with eyes that follow the viewer from one end of a gallery to the other), and *The Lady Derringer* (an experimental short named after the miniature gun designed to fit neatly into a woman's pocketbook).

Lunchtime Talk and Tour with Blackwood Staff
Wednesday, January 22, 12–1pm

Artist Talk with Amanda Strong
Thursday, February 13,
12:30–1:30pm
Sheridan College, Annie Smith Arts Centre, Mezzanine
Oakville

Creative Storytelling Through Animation: Workshop
February 15–16
Toronto Animated Image Society
1411 Dufferin St, Unit B
Toronto

In this two-day workshop, Indigenous (Michif) filmmaker and animator Amanda Strong will guide participants in exploring techniques for creative and visual storytelling, directing, and staging stop-motion animations.

FREE and open to the public—advance registration required. This workshop is presented in partnership with the Toronto Animated Image Society.

FREE Contemporary Art Bus Tour
Exhibition tour of Blackwood Gallery, Art Gallery of York University, Robert McLaughlin Gallery
Sunday, March 1, 12–5pm

Biographies

Parastoo Anoushahpour is a Toronto-based artist with a moving image practice working predominantly with video, film and installation. Her recent solo and collaborative work has been shown at Punto de Vista Film Festival; Sharjah Film Platform; Viennale; Projections (New York Film Festival); Wavelengths (Toronto International Film Festival); Images Festival, Toronto; International Film Festival Rotterdam; Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen; Media City Film Festival, Windsor/Detroit; Experimenta, Bangalore; ZK/U Centre for Art & Urbanistics, Berlin; and Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography, Toronto.

Montreal-based artist **Daniel Barrow** works in video, film, printmaking and drawing, but is best known for his use of antiquated technologies, his "registered projection" installations, and his narrative performances using overhead projection. Barrow describes his performance method as a process of "creating and adapting comic narratives to manual forms of animation by projecting, layering, and manipulating drawings on overhead projectors." Barrow has exhibited widely in Canada and abroad. He has performed at The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; MoMa PS1, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen; TBA festival, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art; and the British Film Institute's London Film Festival. Barrow was the winner of the 2010 Sobey Art Award and the 2013 Glenfiddich Artist in Residence Prize.

Zach Blas is an artist, filmmaker, writer, and lecturer in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London. He has exhibited, lectured, and held screenings internationally, recently at the Walker Art Center, 2018 Gwangju Biennale, Matadero Madrid, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 68th Berlin International Film Festival, Art in General, Gasworks, and e-flux. His practice has been supported by a Creative Capital award in Emerging Fields, the Arts Council England, and Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst. Blas is a 2018–2020 UK Arts and Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellow.

Laurie Kang is an artist living in Toronto. Her work has been exhibited at Interstate Projects and Topless, New York; The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Cooper Cole, 8-11, The Loon, Gallery TPW, Franz Kaka, and Carl Louie, Toronto; Remai Modern, Saskatoon; Galerie Antoine Ertaskiran and L'inconnue, Montreal; Raster Gallery, Warsaw; Wrocław Contemporary Museum, Poland; and Camera Austria, Graz. She has been artist-in-residence at Rupert, Vilnius; Tag Team, Bergen; The Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Alberta; and Interstate Projects, Brooklyn. She holds an MFA from the Milton Avery School of the Arts at Bard College and is represented by Franz Kaka in Toronto.

Pedro Neves Marques is a visual artist, filmmaker, and writer. Born in Lisbon, Portugal, he lives in New York City. Among others, he has exhibited or screened his work at Gasworks, Tate Modern, and Serpentine Galleries Cinema, London; Pérez Art Museum of Miami; e-flux, Sculpture-Center, and Anthology Film Archives, New York; Jeu de Paume and Kadist Art Foundation, Paris; Castello di Rivoli, V-A-C Foundation and PAV, Italy; Sursock Art Museum, Beirut; Times Guangdong Museum, Guangzhou; Fondación Botín, Spain; and Museu Coleção Berardo and MAAT, Lisbon; as well as in Toronto International Film Festival, New York Film Festival, Winterthur Short Film Festival, Indie Lisboa, and Doc-Lisbon. As a writer, he edited *The Forest and the School: Where to Sit at the Dinner Table?* (2015), an anthology on Brazilian Antropofagia and anthropology; authored two short-story collections, including *Morrer na América* (2017); and has contributed to many books and magazines. Together with artist Mariana Silva he is the founder of inhabitants, an online channel for exploratory video and documentary reporting.

Alex McLeod is a Toronto-based visual artist who creates work about interconnection, life's cycles, and empathy through the computer as medium. Prints, animations, and sculptures function as gateways into alternative dimensions, oscillating between the real and the imagined. McLeod holds a BFA from the Ontario College of Art and Design, and a Master of Digital Media from the Yeates School of Graduate Studies at Ryerson University, Toronto. He has exhibited extensively at the provincial, national, and international levels. His work is held in private and public collections including the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto.

Linda Sanchez studied at the École Supérieure d'Art d'Annecy and is a member of Le laboratoire des intuitions (The Intuition Laboratory) at that same institution, which supports the development of experimental approaches. In addition to numerous solo and group exhibitions (including *Otium #3* at the Institut d'art contemporain Villeurbanne/Rhône-Alpes in 2018), her artistic investigations have given rise to lectures (for example with the anthropologist Tim Ingold in 2014), residencies, and collaborations with scientists. Since 2016, she has also participated in the Laboratoire espace cerveau at the IAC Villeurbane/Rhône-Alpes. In 2017, Sanchez was awarded the Prix Découverte by the Amis du Palais de Tokyo and the Révélations Emerige grant. In 2019, with Flora Moscovici, she presented the project *dérobées*, which arose from a residency at the Villa Arson in Nice.

Amanda Strong is an Indigenous (Michif) interdisciplinary artist with a focus on filmmaking, stop-motion animations, and media art. She is currently based on unceded Coast Salish territories also known as Vancouver, BC. Strong is the owner, director, and producer of Spotted Fawn Productions (SFP). Under her direction, SFP uses a multi-layered approach and unconventional methods, centered on collaboration in all aspects of their work. Strong received a BAA in Interpretative Illustration and a Diploma in Applied Photography from the Sheridan Institute. With a cross-disciplinary focus, common themes in her work are reclamation of Indigenous histories, lineage, language, and culture. Strong's work is fiercely process-driven and takes form in various mediums such as: virtual reality, stop-motion, 2D/3D animation, gallery/museum installations, published books, and community-activated projects. Strong and her team at Spotted Fawn Productions are currently working on the research and development of bringing these works into more interactive spaces.

Jemima Wyman is an artist based in Los Angeles. Her most recent work focuses on patterns and masking used by marginalized groups to gain power. Wyman's recent exhibitions were held at Sullivan+Strumpf, Australia (2019 & 2017); Commonwealth and Council, USA (2018 & 2015); HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel), Austria (2019); Museum of Australian Democracy (2019); Wellington City Gallery, New Zealand (2018); and ZKM, Germany (2018). Wyman's artwork has been included in the Sydney (2010), Liverpool (2012) and Gwangju (2018) Biennials. Her work has been reviewed in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Frieze*, *Artforum*, *Camera Obscura*, *LA Weekly*, *Eyeline*, *Art Collector*, and *Artlink*.

Acknowledgments

Canada Council Conseil des arts
for the Arts du Canada

ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
MISSISSAUGA

Canadä

Blackwood Gallery
University of Toronto Mississauga
3359 Mississauga Road
Mississauga, ON L5L 1C6
905-828-3789
blackwoodgallery.ca

Gallery Hours
Monday–Friday: 12–5pm
Wednesday: 12–9pm
Saturday: 12–3pm

The Blackwood Gallery promotes LGBTQ2 positive
spaces and experiences and is free of physical barriers.
The gallery is FREE and open to the public.