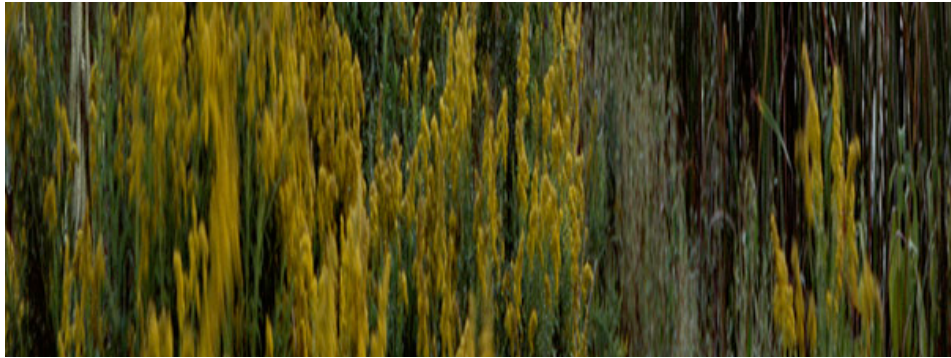


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ART REVIEW: "Natura"

Passing the torch

By [Rebecca Rafferty](#) on March 4, 2009



The group show currently up at Rochester Contemporary is the creation of former RIT professor John Pfahl, and is co-curated by Therese Mulligan, the coordinator of the MFA program at RIT's School of Photographic Arts and Sciences. The exhibit follows the gallery's annual tradition of hosting a "Maker/Mentor" show, in which a teacher-artist shows work with one or more students. All of the 15 participating artists (now teacher/mentors in their own right, or professional artists who have photographed for major periodicals) studied with Pfahl at RIT, where he taught photography from 1968 to 1985.

"Natura" meditates on the constant flux of the natural world and the effects of the all-pervading human touch on it. In the exhibition essay, Mulligan writes that the show's title "encompasses phenomena of nature, from the microscopic world of atoms to the boundless regions of the cosmos. [...] As viewed through the photographic medium, the work displayed here offers a diverse and compelling artistic commentary on the natural environment, as well as the intervening role of humankind, science and technology. Thus nature is seen as both place and space, public and private, concrete and transformative."

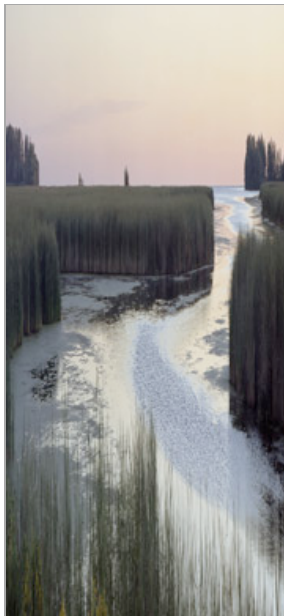
Wonderkammer keeper Alida Fish is the product of cool pack-rat parents, who kept their own domestic museum of sentimental objects. As a child, Fish had her own collection of wonders amid the roots of an oleander tree (the namesake of her series of photos) in Bermuda, where she grew up. Fish later developed an interest in the private collections of wonders prized by the rich. Her dim-lighted, low-contrast wet collodion tin

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types recall daguerreotypes and emit the feeling of quiet awe in discovery, with exquisitely creepy creatures from the depths, including the "Shell Octopus," "Paper Nautilus," and "Sea Horse." We no longer marvel over such things, and what used to inspire wonder may soon be only found in photos, or as remains on dusty shelves.

Forest McMullin's highly detailed inkjet prints deal with the elimination of creatures, are last portraits before the return to the land, and read like woodsy murder scenes. "Bird" is a nearly abstracted close up of bloodied speckled feathers, and "Fox" shows wet fur on the bend of a still black forepaw.

Stuart Rome has us lost in the woods, in gelatin silver print scenes with absolutely no break from nature, no sign of human presence in the land. The tropical paradise of "Whorl, Bali" is complete with snaking branches and vines, a low canopy of thick forest over ferns and an almost audible rushing brook. These full-of-life images contrast sharply with Marilyn Bridges' gelatin silver prints of equally untouched places of the world.

"Desertscape, Death Valley, CA", is all soft curves and sharp ridges, indicating an eternal shift of appearance carved out by wind, untouched by and protected from us for its lack of usefulness. The other two locations, "Harding Ice Field, Kanai Fjord, Alaska" and "Mount St. Helens Crater with Water, Washington," complete a set of studies of unwanted but beautiful places.

Each of July Natal's three archival inkjet prints shows something of a natural environment, coupled with the effects of human industry. From her series "Future Perfect," the photos are documentations of "nature as it is today, inseparable from us, and like us, in turmoil." Natal claims that "we recycle our longing for nature in its pristine state into models defined by science and technology, in tandem with humankind's past experiences and future needs, to create alternate worlds." In "Springs Preserve, Las Vegas: The Trails," we see a dry brown wasteland, the neglected outskirts of the flashy and debauched city, the ghost skyline of which can be seen in the horizon, under a dirty-yellow sky. Three circles at the bottom of the print hold portraits of the area's residents: a vulture, a desert rodent, and what looks like a small fox creature.

I won't deny that I spend most of my time in a fantasy world. I was drawn, in a serious way, to Dean Chamberlain "Yellow Falling," a fuji flex pic mounted on aluminum, in which every particle in the scene screams its colors for your attention. The milky green, misty sky glows as it presides over a vibrant acid-yellow leafed tree, which is shedding into a clearing. This kind of a partially real, sacred space, where trees and sky exhale mysticism, is where you come into contact with myth.

Three archival inkjet prints of John Pfahl's own work are included in the show, in which he employed the unusual technique of photographing environments, then digitally squishing the scene to gain a towering, column-like new image. Ironically, by squishing the image, Pfahl enhances our impression of just how vast the world is. In "Twilight in the Wilderness (Adirondacks)," a pastel sky with a towering, cascading trail of clouds dominates. Only about one-sixth of the image is land, with dense groups of trees and newly abrupt mountains. Treetops become as thin as hairs in "Autumn Lagoon (Braddock Bay)," and waves in the water are clustered shimmering ripples. The condensed landscapes lend a fleeting feeling of simultaneously being in the environment, and very far away from it, and subtly comment on our relationship with the spaces and moments in which we exist.

A good mentor is one who feels the value in our brief nature, who never settles into stale routine, but feeds the innovative and wondering spirit, continues to ask questions, and inspires the audience to forever think about the world in new ways.

Natura

Through March 22



One of John Pfahl's column-like images from the show "Natura," now at Rochester Contemporary. PHOTO PROVIDED

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