

Catriona Jeffries

Abbas Akhavan

spill

MOMENTA Biennale at Phi
Foundation, Montreal, Canada

September 8, 2021–January 9,
2022

Vancouver

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Featured in
Issue 223

MOMENTA 2021 Centres Indigenous and Nonhumanist Notions of Nature

The 17th edition of MOMENTA Biennale de l'image presents a smattering of artworks and immersive installations that transcend Western environmental values

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BY DIDIER MORELLI IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, REVIEWS ACROSS THE WORLD | 30 SEP 21



There are few contemporary art events in Tiohtià:ke / Mooniyang / Montreal that unite artist-run centres, university art galleries, museums and community spaces. Yet, since 1989, MOMENTA Biennale de l'image has collaborated with a range of exhibition venues to deliver a diverse programme of local, national and international artists across the city. Over the past decade, and particularly since being renamed in 2017 from Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal (Montreal Photography Month), the biennial has progressed from a focus on traditional photographic practices and curatorial premises to a more inclusive mandate that allows for a broader range of image-based works, artists and collectives to enter into dialogue. The 17th edition, titled 'Quand la nature ressent' (Sensing Nature), takes another leap in this direction, leaving behind two-dimensional representations of the natural world in favour of numerous sensuous installations, affecting landscapes and politically engaged settings for the viewer to literally step into, contemplate and be moved. Under the direction of guest curator Stefanie Hessler (Norway) in collaboration with Camille Georgeson-Usher (Canada), Maude Johnson (Canada) and Himali Singh Soin (India/UK), the biennial's presentation of 51 artists from 24 countries in 14 different exhibition venues is a milestone.



Abbas Akhavan, 'spill', exhibition view presented at the PHI Foundation, Montreal as part of MOMENTA 2021. Courtesy the artist and PHI Foundation, Montreal; photography: Jean-Michael Seminaro

One of the biennial's main sites – the massive Le Carré de Gaspé contemporary art hub, in the city's hip Mile End neighbourhood – welcomes audiences to warm hues of electric purple, fuchsia pink and deep neon blue. The building houses four of the artist-run spaces participating in the programme: the Centre Clarke, Diagonale, Occurrence and OPTICA. At the Centre Clark, the collective New Red Order (Adam & Zack Khalil, Kite and Jackson Polys) present *The Last of the Lemurians* (2021), an immersive installation anchored by a large circular floating projection. Eerie green and red light emanates from crystal-like sculptures on tall white plinths while domestic plants and their cuttings populate the space. The video – a wandering, archaeological, new-age journey – tackles popular cultural belief in Lemuria, a hypothetical 'lost land' located in the Indian Oceans, which has been the subject of Western fantasy for decades. Revisiting racist and romantic conceptions of Indigeneity with a combination of lasers, dark moody caves and rolling ocean waves, New Red Order address how white colonial desires have collapsed native spiritual beliefs with mysticism and alienness in a fetishized, self-serving quest for wellness.





BUSH Gallery, *Pocket Guide-vest Power Pocket*, 2021, installation view, presented at OPTICA, Montreal, as part of MOMENTA 2021. Courtesy: the artists and OPTICA, Montreal; photography: Jean-Michael Seminaro

At OPTICA, another collective, BUSH Gallery (Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, Peter Morin and Tania Willard), display works produced during the summer of 2021 at a residency on Willard's land on Neskonalith Indian Reserve in Secwepemcúłecw in the British Columbia Interior. Focusing on the relationships between land, light and the political implications of site-specific creation and its Eurocentric treatment of the geological universe as inert, devoid of spirit and/or agency, the exhibition, 'Diffracting of Light and of Land', combines photographs with multiple handmade, brightly coloured objects. *Touch the Earth* (2021), for instance, comprises paint brushes made of fur, wood from a colonial building and copper; *Harvest Bag* (2021) is assembled from light-sensitive emulsion on tipi canvas; and *Land Art (x7)* (2021) is a series of seven porcelain spray paint-like cans with deer buck tail and beeswax. 'Aesthetic disobedience', a slogan stitched to *Pocket Guide-vest Power Pocket* (2021) – which consists of a suspended, red-wool, sleeveless vest with pearls, accents of 3M reflective orange fabric and red tassels hanging to the ground – manifests throughout the exhibition as the collective rethinks land-art traditions that exploited nature in the name of artmaking.



Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, 'Poetic Disorder', exhibition view presented at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montreal, as part of MOMENTA 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montreal; photography: Jean-Michael Seminaro

In downtown Montreal, at Galerie Leonard & Bina Ellen, the Puerto Rican artist Beatriz Santiago Muñoz is the subject of the solo exhibition 'Poetic Disorder'. Dissecting perspectives of Puerto Rico, Haiti and other parts of the Caribbean – whose past is steeped in colonization, military occupation and narratives of resistance – the artist's four filmic works are a constellation of nonlinear, prismatic ways of sensing nature. The most impressive of these, *Binaural* (2019), is composed of six 16mm films shot in Puerto Rico and the Solomon Islands. Projected across the gallery on suspended screens are short loops of people foraging for plants, swaying in a hammock, scanning a horizon, following a carved relief and a neon flickering in the dark. Such images circumvent tourist fantasies to re-create a fractured topography of the prepackaged 'island paradise' found on billboards and in advertisements.

Through its many beautiful and more troubling facets, 'Sensing Nature' is at its strongest when attending to how contemporary and emerging non-white, Indigenous, queer and crip artists, collectives and communities feel nature and/or are felt by it in return. In addition, a series of live and online performances and an augmented reality route through public spaces extend MOMENTA beyond the insular monotone of the white-cube experience. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Indigenous-led outdoor garden *Teionhenkwen: Supporters of Life*, a site-sensitive installation on the north lawn of the National Library and Archives of Quebec. Created by T'uy't'ananat-Cease Wyss, with the help of Silverbear and Joce TwoCrows Mashkikii Bimosewin Tremblay, the work draws from the iconography and historicity of the Dish With One Spoon wampum, a treaty made between the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee to peaceably share harvesting territory in the region.



Chloë Lum & Yannick Desranleau, 'Crushed Butterflies Dream Too', exhibition view presented at the Galerie B-312, Montreal, as part of MOMENTA 2021. Courtesy: the artists and Galerie B-312, Montreal; photography: Jean-Michael Seminaro

Re-creating the wampum design through planters containing native flora with medicinal, utilitarian or ceremonial properties, this open-air collaborative sculpture forms a lush local ecology rich in Indigenous knowledges as well as an easily accessible space of gathering, exchange and spiritual contemplation. Wyss's contribution to the biennial is undoubtedly one of its cornerstones, explicitly positioning the importance of land rights, Indigenous visibility and non-white rites of being in nature at the forefront of contemporary-art discourse. Considering the inseparability of environmental and social justice in forging paths for co-existence within shared ecosystems of thinking and doing, 'Sensing Nature' proposes myriad aesthetic, choreographic, sonic and conceptual manifestations across a variety of media that transcend traditional notions of image-making in scintillating and embodied ways.

*The 17th edition of **MOMENTA Biennale de l'image, 'Sensing Nature'**, is on view at various venues in Montreal, Canada, until 24 October.*

Main image: Caroline Monnet and Laura Ortman, 'Exquisite Score', exhibition view presented at the McCord Museum, Montreal, as part of MOMENTA 2021. Courtesy: the artists and McCord Museum, Montreal; photography: Jean-Michael Seminaro



DIDIER MORELLI

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SLANT

NATURAL CAUSES

Jayne Wilkinson on the Momenta Biennale de l'image

October 20, 2021



View of "Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau: Crushed Butterflies Dream Too," 2021. Galerie B-312, MOMENTA 2021.

QUESTIONS OF CARE and ecological entanglement have dominated art discourse for several years but seem to have grown in urgency of late, as the pandemic forced a renegotiation of relationships, and values, on a global scale. Using art to bridge the gulf in perception between humans and nonhuman species, the seventeenth edition of Montréal's Momenta Biennale de l'Image—curated by Stefanie Hessler in collaboration with Camille Georgeson-Usher, Maude Johnson, and Himali Singh Soin, and on view until October 24—addresses the effects of sensing, and being sensed by, the natural world. The theme is ostensibly about experiencing "nature" beyond photographic representation (a field to which this biennial, previously named *Mois de la Photo*, has typically hewed tightly), and the strongest projects take up land and water through embodied practices of stewardship operative outside the gallery system. Nationally and globally, Indigenous artists are leading these conversations—around species relationships, liquid ecologies, land-based learning, and the intersection of technology with each—and the curatorial selection demonstrated as much.

At the Grande bibliothèque (BAnQ), artist and ethnobotanist T'uy't'ananat-Cease Wyss, along with collaborators Silverbear and Joce TwoCrows Mashkikii Bimosewin Tremblay, built a public garden that incorporates local plant varieties (beans, corn, flowering tobacco, medicinal herbs), drawing on Indigenous knowledge to remediate urban spaces. Similarly, BUSH Gallery, an ongoing, collaborative residency project created at Tania Willard's on-reserve home in Secwepemcúlécw, integrates land stewardship as aesthetic practice. This iteration, shown at artist-run center Optica, includes artists Peter Morin, Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, and Willard, as well as "kids, family, the land and dogs," who together cocreated a suite of sculptural assemblages using photosensitive supports, revealing how nonhuman species can represent themselves and the land in ways that are tangible, not theoretical.



T'uy't'nanat-Cease Wyss, *TEIONHENKWEN*, 2021. Installation view, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, MOMENTA 2021.

Indigenous collaborations were woven throughout many sites. At the McCord Museum, Caroline Monnet and Laura Ortman's call-and-response installation (titled *Exquisite Score* in a nod to the Surrealists' exquisite corpse) is a stunning tribute to family and friendship —Ortman's soaring violin compositions resonate across Monnet's psychedelic wall-sized print and video collages, which combine kaleidoscopic forest scenes and Super-8 home videos to absorbing effect. At Centre Clark, New Red Order members Adam Khalil, Zack Khalil, Kite, and Jackson Polys poke fun at Theosophist and later New Age beliefs in their video *The Last of the Lemurians*, 2021, named after a supposedly "pure" ancestral race said to have inhabited a mythical sunken continent in the Indian Ocean. The titular work humorously deflates this racist construction of indigeneity, which seems at least partially aligned with the neo-shamanist trend of selling rocks, plants, and crystals as wellness merchandise, also mocked here.

Challenges that afflict many biennials—too little exhibition space for too-large ambitions—are present at this Momena, and the group shows in particular suffer from sound bleeds and tangled sight lines. Still, given the intense constraints of working under pandemic conditions and travel restrictions, the curators assembled works by an impressive group of artists. And there are some standout moments of synchronicity: Taloi Havini's three-channel video installation at Galerie de l'UQAM, with its slow-moving aerials of the toxic landscapes around the long-closed Panguna copper mine in Bougainville, an autonomous region in Papua New Guinea, bisects the space holding Tsēmā Igharas and Erin Siddall's bubblelike glass vitrines of still-radioactive mineral samples from the Northwest Territories community of Délne, about 150 miles from the decommissioned uranium mines at Port Radium. Together, the two works offer a sobering look at the global reach and lethal afterlife of extraction.



View of "New Red Order: The Last of the Lemurians," 2021. Centre CLARK, MOMENTA 2021.

Several strong solo projects conceive immersive, neon-hued environments to different ends. In Anne Duk Hee Jordan's deep blue room at the Musée des beaux-arts Montréal, extreme video close-ups of underwater oddities enveloped mechanical *Critters* and *Clapping Clams*, both 2018, whose unpredictable sounds punctuate the bewildering and at times claustrophobic feeling of life below the surface. Abbas Akhavan's *spill*, 2020, at Phi Foundation—a deceptively simple rock pond and waterfall installed on a chroma-key green stage—highlights the mediated quality of contemporary experiences of nature as paradoxically meditative and anxiety-making, a feeling further provoked by the slow, persistent drip of water from the gallery's ceiling. At Galerie B-312, Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau's Technicolor prosthetic sculptures augment a four-song "meta-musical" performance based on the plant life of Rio de Janeiro. A treatise on chronic illness and the body emerged through an imagined epistolary exchange with Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector—a refreshing departure from the biennial's dominant motif of interspecies sensing.



Abbas Akhavan, *spill*, 2021. Installation view, PHI Foundation, MOMENTA 2021, Montreal.

What is at stake in all these investigations into the division of humans from nature, in the manifold attempts to rewire communication across species in a more genuine way? Sensory experiences can only do so much to engage empathy and bridge the divide between human and nonhuman life. Is it possible to renounce the power of an anthropocentric position in exhibitions designed by and for people? I cynically imagine future historians puzzling over this moment of urgency, asking why artists were trying to do the work of scientists while corporations were callously investing in emissions-heavy activities like consumer space travel. Wildfires, droughts, hurricanes, melting ice sheets, and the general state of catastrophe have barely registered with a billionaire class maniacally accumulating extractive capital, and so the work in this edition of *Momenta*, like many ecology-oriented art endeavors before it, takes on an inevitable air of compunction. The rush to make and archive images of nature feels like an attempt to assuage the guilt of planetary collapse, or to ensure that future generations know the rich biodiversity of the planet before the finality of mass extinction. In the biennial's publication, Georgeson-Usher, a Coast Salish, Sahtu Dene, and Scottish curator and member of the curatorial team, contributes a poetic missive on the ethics of engaging with nonhuman life, asking us to "imagine, even briefly, that we live somewhere built in tenderness and respect between all beings. A world that does not need to pretend, that transforms simply because it can." It can't be otherwise, as we anxiously anticipate the coming decade of environmental crises.

Jayne Wilkinson is a writer, editor, and curator based in Toronto.