

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.

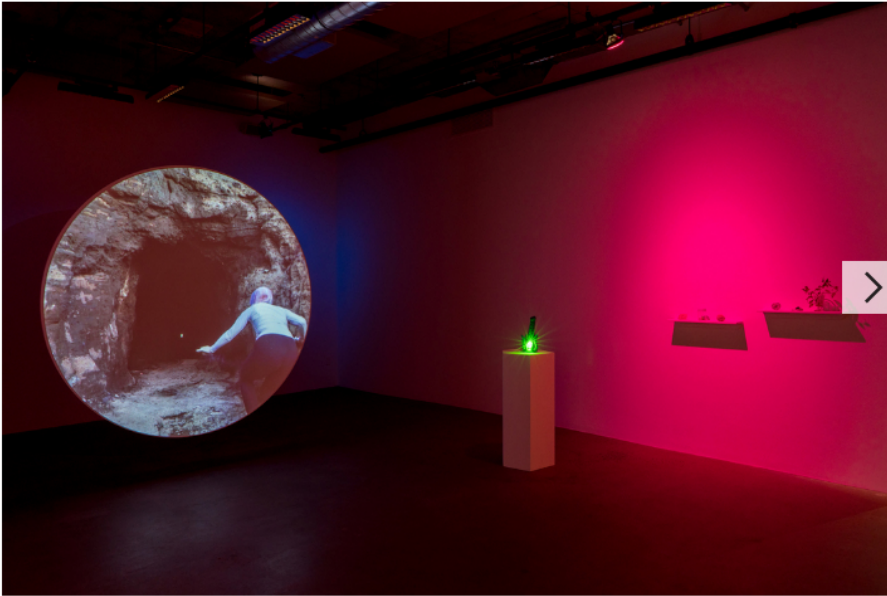
At the Grande bibliothèque (BAnQ), artist and ethnobotanist T'uy't'ananat-Cease Wyss, along with collaborators Silverbear and Joce TwoCrows Mashkikii Bimosewin Tremblay, built a public garden that incorporates local plant varieties (beans, corn, flowering tobacco, medicinal herbs), drawing on Indigenous knowledge to remediate urban spaces. Similarly, BUSH Gallery, an ongoing, collaborative residency project created at Tania Willard's on-reserve home in Secwepemcúlëcw, 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'ananat-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 Délı̄ne, 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.*