

17th MOMENTA Biennale, “Sensing Nature”

by Xenia Benivolski

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Various locations, Montréal

October 22, 2021



T'uy'ttanat-Cease Wyss, *TEIONHENKWEN Supporters of Life*, 2021. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and MOMENTA. Photo by Jean-Michael Seminaro.

The seventeenth edition of MOMENTA seeks to map out alternate ways of sensing the natural world and, in return, to allow nature to respond in ways imagined, projected, and real. Curated by Stefanie Hessler with Camille Georgeson-Usher, Maude Johnson, and Himali Singh Soin, the biennale comprises fifteen exhibitions scattered throughout the city's institutions and galleries, which offer divergent perspectives from the points of view of air, water, land, animal, and plant life. These projects tether the exhibition to the site of Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyang/Montréal, and expand the local context by letting global contemporary issues resonate throughout.

On opening day, a group gathered to see *TEIONHENKWEN Supporters of Life*, a new installation in a city park by Montréal's Grande Bibliothèque, where artist and ethnobotanist T'uy'ttanat-Cease Wyss, in collaboration with Silverbear and Joce TwoCrows Mashkikii Bimosewin Tremblay, planted an elaborate garden of indigenous plants, carefully researched for their medicinal and ceremonial properties. The garden is a new start: walking between the wooden crates, viewers take part in a social gathering between groups of plants and of humans. This encounter proposes a novel way of moving through the biennial, through touch, smell, and the presence of the entities that prompt one to ponder the priorities and politics of cross-species assembly.

The complexity of these relationships weaves through many of the works, including the 2012 video installation *Between the Waves* by Tejal Shah, part of the group exhibition “Worldmaking Tentacles” at Fonderie Darling. Shah’s non-specific characters sleuth around the dystopian, polluted landscape, fingering plants and pieces of garbage alike. The sensuality with which her subjects approach these materials suggests that a process of self-discovery is taking place: that nature is as dirty as it is wonderful, and that we are all porous, susceptible to, and seduced by it.

Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau’s refreshing exhibition “Crushed butterflies dream too” at Galerie B-312 is an ode to Clarice Lispector. A musical video entitled *The Garden of a Former House Turned Museum* (2021) is the vehicle for a series of operatic arias, addressed to the Brazilian writer, that feel like self-affirmations by an internal narrator negotiating the border between the inside and the outside. Lispector’s long-form, self-directed musings have the tendency to infect the reader with her syntax, and the artists have perfectly articulated that prosaic contagion with their own lyrics: “I swallow the pill, and it merges with me. I wear the jumper, and it becomes my skin. I hold the thing, lay on the thing, lean into the thing; It responds to me, and I respond to it.” The work speaks to the blurring of physical, mental, and emotional boundaries. It is accompanied by body-sized sculptures incorporating negative spaces and props from the video.

Parts of the biennial explore the possibilities of the screen itself. MOMENTA’s “Liquid Crystals” program is an interactive route consisting of augmented reality artworks appearing in different locations throughout the city, notably Tsēmā Igharas’s *Emergence*, which draws out connections between her works at both Vox and Galerie de l’UQAM. Igharas combines photos of obsidian from Mount Edziza in the ancestral territory of the Tāttān people, to which she belongs, with the urban landscape, drawing on the enigmatic power of the dark, hard, iridescent rock. At the PHI Foundation for Contemporary Art, Abbas Akhavan’s *spill* (2021) is a pond surrounded by rocks set in an otherwise perfectly flat green chroma screen. Akhavan’s ongoing study of ornamental structures examines the nature of cultivation, here by juxtaposing the natural water feature with the extreme artificiality of the green screen. At the same time, it is the screen that is authentic, the pond artificially constructed. Like the pandemic, the pond should be a portal, but it’s a dead end: gazing into its depths we will find only our own reflection.

In the group exhibition “Wet Futures” at Centre Vox, Ayesha Hameed and Hamedine Kane’s video essay exposes an encounter between bodies and the ocean as emblematic of a violent global history of colonialism. *In the Shadow of Our Ghosts / À l’ombre de nos fantômes* (2018) is a densely acoustic journey taken with an anonymous figure travelling through a city, wandering along the shore, and through the Sahelian landscape. The work relates to a 2006 incident in which the bodies of several migrants were found off the coast of Barbados. By including sonic elements that tell the story of the journey, Hameed explores the aftereffects on these bodies, claimed by the sun, salt, and air, and reintegrated into the natural landscape that in turn becomes part of the video’s visuals and acoustics. Reflecting on the policies that have historically criminalized and marginalized migrants, the work establishes the body of water as a keeper of trauma.

Lens-based work tends, traditionally, to be about seeing time from a set position, capturing particular—and partial—histories. With this edition, MOMENTA, which self-defines as the “Biennale de l’image” (formerly “Le Mois de la Photo”), makes an important shift from the purely visual to the multi-sensory, one that abandons its stake in western art-historical narratives and admits a multitude of perspectives. “Could the oyster when torn from its root feel anxiety?” asks Lispector in *Água Viva* [The Stream of Life] (1973). In its best moments, the exhibition illuminates the wholly co-dependent relationship between humanity and the natural world, and captures a sense that the fears and fantasies we tend to project onto nature are very much our own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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