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## Neon Nature

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# NEON NATURE

by

JESSAMY MCMANUS

(Under the Direction of Elsie Taliaferro Hill)

## ABSTRACT

The goal of this work is to explore my painting of nature in our contemporary time, considering the current geological epoch termed the Anthropocene, an era I think of as postnatural. *Neon Nature* is a collection of portraits of hypernatural creatures I call “pseudo-specimens”. These pseudo-specimens symbolize hypernature, which describes manufactured nature as better than authentic nature. These specimens are painted in vanitas-inspired still life scenes to act as a reminder of our changing nature, or new-nature.

Influenced by living in suburbia where nature is manicured and controlled, I am interested in the divide between the “born” and the “made,” the natural versus artificial, and the human urge to manipulate and control nature. I believe depictions of nature in contemporary art must reflect the new nature of the Anthropocene, or hypernature, where we now question what is truly “natural.” I paint these fictitious creatures to slow down and study my conflicted feelings on the current state of nature, and to create contemporary vanitas that serve to remind the viewer of our new, hypernatural nature.

INDEX WORDS: Nature, Anthropocene, Artificial, Natural, Hypernature, Vanitas, Postnatural, New-nature, Nature painting

NEON NATURE

by

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B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2015

M.F.A., Georgia Southern University, 2017

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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NEON NATURE

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(In memory of Professor Patricia Walker who fostered my love of painting nature.)

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

I discovered a powerful and delicate hands-on interaction with nature while watching my mother grow plants in the greenhouse in our backyard. The greenhouse was an artificial incubator for life. The experience of watching my mother's gardening shaped my understanding of my relationship to the natural world and formed a fascination with the intersection of nature and technology. Gardening nature, like painting nature, is a powerful, controlling and almost-God-like intervention. Growing up in suburbia, nature is found in the form of a manicured garden bed or a concrete pond. We are compelled to create artificial nature in our synthetic suburbia to offset the awareness of our destruction of nature, and I believe people need the illusion of control and comfort that technology gives us.

Reputable scientists believe that the Earth has shifted from the Holocene era, the epoch of the last ten thousand years, into the Anthropocene era. This epoch is characterized by the idea that humanity is the dominant force over nature and the development of the planet from the highest level of ozone to the deepest level of the ocean.<sup>1</sup> When I refer to "nature" in this paper I am discussing anything that is not human or human-made because it is unclear what is natural nature anymore. Postnaturalism describes an era where common organisms have been intentionally and genetically altered by humans. In this postnatural era, our new-nature includes virtual worlds, genetically modified food, Uncanny Valley robots, and omnipresent wifi. This blend of technology and nature and the artificial and the natural is both exciting and terrifying, and my paintings represent this modern-day nature considering the ideas of hypernature. The

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<sup>1</sup> J. Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*. Harvard UP, 2015.

term hypernature describes manufactured nature, which is prettier, bigger, and safer than the real thing. I am conflicted by the idea of hypernature because this sense of control over nature and life is false especially in light of the Anthropocene.

I see parallels between a gardener growing plants from seed, a scientist growing life in a petri dish, and an artist growing images from paint on canvas. When I paint portraits of my pseudo-specimens in my studio, I feel like a mad scientist creating hybrid creatures. These paintings aim to function as a vanitas-like reminder of the false control technology gives us over life and nature within our new-nature, hypernature.

This thesis will detail my process of developing the work for my MFA Thesis Exhibition. I will discuss the experimentation and research of my early work that led to the body of work in *Neon Nature*. I will also explain my research on contemporary artists, and early-century naturalists, that influenced and expanded the content and painting practice used to create works for my MFA exhibition.

## CHAPTER 2

### INFLUENCES

I consider two moments in my early work as major influences that led to the creation of my pseudo-specimen portraits in *Neon Nature*. The first is a shift in technique to a painterly and intuitive drawing-style, with which I illustrated what I called “imaginary creatures” influenced by naturalist Ernst Haeckel and biologist Jakob von Uexküll. The second moment is the project titled *Creature of Your Things*, which was influenced by early-century curiosity cabinets and natural history collections, and by contemporary artist Mark Dion.

The influential beginnings of my thesis work occurred when my techniques shifted from a style based on rendering three-dimensional forms in logical space, to a style based on fluid and intuitive painting techniques. Loose and uncalculated paint gestures evolved into biomorphic figures that altered the composition with each new form added. These biomorphic forms materialized through fluid brushstrokes, and became creature-character protagonists in my imagined narrative. By using an exclusively additive technique of paint application, where multiple layers of paint remain partly visible throughout the process, new forms emerged. I ensured that my brushstrokes still resembled paint instead of rendering it to hide from its materiality, and I capitalized on the paint’s viscosity and the autonomous flow of paint drips. This is what James Elkins, in his book *What Painting Is*, refers to as “liquid thinking”<sup>2</sup>, when the paint seems to take a life of its own. By intentionally applying the paint both upright and

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<sup>2</sup> J. Elkins, *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy*. Routledge, 2000, pp. 5.

horizontally, I aimed to control the liquidity of the paint while allowing the drips to “take on a life of their own”. In the same way that the drips seemed animated, the raw drawing-style of brush strokes created biomorphic forms in which I saw my “imagined creatures.” The imagined creatures in this series are the ancestors of the current “pseudo-specimens” in my thesis work.



Figure 1. Jessamy McManus, *The Chase*, mixed media on board, 2016

Seeing these creatures in the paint was a very whimsical and playful studio process. Similar to how we can see a rabbit in the clouds, or figures in a Rorschach inkblot, I saw “worm” and “pod” creatures with faces in these brushstrokes, a natural response called pareidolia. Pareidolia is a psychological phenomenon involving a stimulus such as an image, sound, or movement in which the mind perceives a familiar pattern of something where none actually exists. The most common pareidolia response is imagining faces or eyes in inanimate things. I intentionally preserved the raw brushstroke quality of the paint, but made sure to include a

“head” and sometimes “eyes” to play with the viewer’s (and my own) instinctive response of pareidolia. I anthropomorphized the creatures as they became characters with a personality in a fictitious narrative. I placed them in scenes of struggle inspired by the climax or peak of drama in a classical painting.

Another major influence of my imagined creature paintings was the 19th century naturalist, Ernst Haeckel, who discovered and documented thousands of protozoan species. Although Haeckel’s intention was to document new species, his illustrations are intentionally embellished and fantastical, leading to an uncertainty of the reality of his illustrated specimens. Haeckel’s often fantastical, rather than realistic, rendering of nature resonated with me because his illustrations seemed to interpret a personal sense of awe in the natural world. I wanted my imaginary creatures to appear as fantastical, mysterious, and whimsical as Haeckel’s, because his protozoan and botanical specimens are charismatic representations of nature.



Figure 2. Ernst Haeckel, *Art Forms in Nature, Pitcher Plants*, lithographic print, 1899

Figure 3. Jessamy McManus, *Pod Creature* (self-portrait), ink and resin on canvas, 2015

Another significant influence of this early work was Jakob von Uexküll, an early 20th century biologist. Uexküll coined the term “Umwelt” to describe the perceptual world in which an organism exists and acts as a subject.<sup>3</sup> The perceptual “bubble”, or Umwelt, for a human is different from that of any other life form. We see and sense things that a dog, for example, will never know is part of his surroundings. Similarly, a dog’s Umwelt is attuned to things we overlook or are incapable of perceiving. Our idea of nature is based on our inescapable human Umwelt. We falsely conclude that objects are autonomous realities that have an existence of their own and are true to every creature, when in fact the objects we perceive are only the same in the Umwelten of other humans. Uexküll’s Umwelt helps to explain why anthropomorphism is a deeply-rooted biological phenomenon. The imagery I made of imagined creatures is from the viewpoint of a human observing creatures in our human Umwelt. We anthropomorphize creatures to better understand them, and creating these characters was a way for me to empathize with nature.

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<sup>3</sup> C. Brentari. *Jakob Von Uexküll: The Discovery of the Umwelt between Biosemiotics and Theoretical Biology*. Springer, 2015.





Figure 4. Jessamy McManus, *Creature of Your Things* (installation close-up)

Figure 5. Jessamy McManus, *Creature of Your Things*, 2016

The second body of work that influenced *Neon Nature* is the project titled *Creature of Your Things*. With this work, I explored my interest in the human versus nature dynamic and 16th-century curiosity cabinets by making my own collection of pseudo-scientific specimens to form an “unnatural” collection. Curiosity cabinets, or “Wunderkammer”, which are the precursors of today’s natural history collections and museums, are among the earliest known avenues to display nature’s artifacts in a constructed display case. The results were a mix of science and superstition that pulled together the natural and manufactured world into a combined realm of wonder.



Figure 6. Engraving from Ferrante Imperato, *Dell' Historia Naturale*, 1599

In order to collect my own specimens for what I called an “unnatural collection,” I gathered discarded material from friends and colleagues by giving them an empty box to fill with



their overlooked debris. I then sculpted a specimen representation of that person from the discards in their box. The “specimens” in my “unnatural collection” reflected the blurred distinctions between the natural and artificial in contemporary nature because they were formed from only unnatural, human-made material. I displayed these relics of our contemporary nature in jars and cabinets, much like the early-century curios were presented in Wunderkammer.



Figure 7. Jessamy McManus, *Creature of Your Things* (“Kyle”), 2016

*Creature of Your Things* was predominantly influenced by contemporary artist and environmentalist Mark Dion, who investigates the intersection of art and natural sciences, and critiques public understanding of nature through educational institutions like museums. Dion makes contemporary curio cabinets to question notions of the representation, display, commodification, and the collecting of nature. He believes that the relics and specimens found in 16th-century cabinets were neither boring tools of education nor mindless spectacles, but instead,

objects that tested reason and generated questions.<sup>4</sup> The curiosity cabinet is the precursor to the modern-day museum, and in my opinion, one of the earliest blends of art and science. Much like the goal of my paintings, the goal of a curiosity cabinet is to suggest meaning, provoke wonder, and prompt the viewer to question the specimens on display. Author and philosopher Alva Noë describes art as a philosophical “strange tool”<sup>5</sup>. A tool has a specific, definable purpose and a “strange tool” is an artifact that does not have an easily defined function, which causes the viewer to experience perception and question meaning itself. For example, a painting of a chair is a strange tool because it has an open-ended purpose rather than a real chair, which has a specific purpose. Instead of thinking about the specific use of a chair, a “strange tool” allows the viewer to think about our experience of a chair when we see a picture of it. I believe curiosity cabinets function as “strange tools” because the curios they contain have been stripped of their original function and given a new, open-ended purpose when displayed in the cabinet.

Mark Dion recognizes the repercussions of the human compulsion to control and dominate nature. For example, his *Cabinet of Marine Debris* is filled with nature-weathered, painted and plastic litter that was harvested off the Alaskan coastline to exhibit the immense amount of plastic pollution in the oceans. He adopts curiosity cabinet presentation to display new-nature's specimens—plastic trash. Many of nature's artifacts presented as curio specimens were altered in some way by an artist, such as painted seashells, decorated wood. Here, the specimens have been altered or decorated by nature. The weathered, torn, and sun-bleached plastic demonstrates the power struggle of human and nature.

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<sup>4</sup> M. Dion, C. Sheehy. *Cabinet of Curiosities: Mark Dion and the University as Installation*. U of Minnesota, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> A. Noë. *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2016, pp. 4.



Figure 8. Mark Dion, *Cabinet of Marine Debris*, 2014

The irony of a natural history display is that it is meant to serve as the study of life, but really is a study of the dead, the most obvious examples being the preserved but decontextualized specimens in a curiosity cabinet, or wunderkammer. However, in *Creature of Your Things*, the specimens are not once-live specimens, but artificial material that gives the feeling of preserved, dead, specimen. Like many of the plastic specimens in Dion's cabinets, the specimens in *Creature of Your Things* are undead. Likewise, memento mori are objects, usually biological material and most commonly a skull or flowers, in classical still life paintings that serve as a

warning or reminder of death. The synthetic specimens in *Creature of Your Things* function as a modern-day memento mori in reference to the fact that this artificial material cannot die.



Figure 9. Jessamy McManus, *Creature of Your Things* (“Casey”), 2016

I encased the specimens in natural history collection-like jars, and also in traditional picture frames, to reference how works of art are presented in an art collection because my specimens are neither actual specimen nor actual art in the traditional sense. Furthermore, the glass cases with their sterile, scientific, safety allows the viewer a comfortable distance, much like the contained danger inside a sealed Petri dish.



Figure 10. Suzanne Anker, *Vanitas (in a Petri dish) 12*, 2013

A major influence of the works in *Neon Nature* is contemporary bio-artist Suzanne Anker, who makes vanitas from Petri dish displays filled with a combination of lustrously-colored plastic, synthetic, and bio material. Vanitas, the 17th-century Dutch style of still life painting included dead or decaying organic objects to remind viewers of their own mortality. Petri dish scientific specimens can function the same way because the Petri dish represents both the study of the dead and the manufactured creation of new life in a laboratory. Because today's scientists are creating new hybrid life forms within the small circular world of the Petri dish, Anker uses the Petri dish as a framing mechanism for her vanitas. Anker's

compositions use traditional symbols such as fruit, eggs, flower buds and seeds in combination with human-made material to metaphorically allude to the cycle of life.

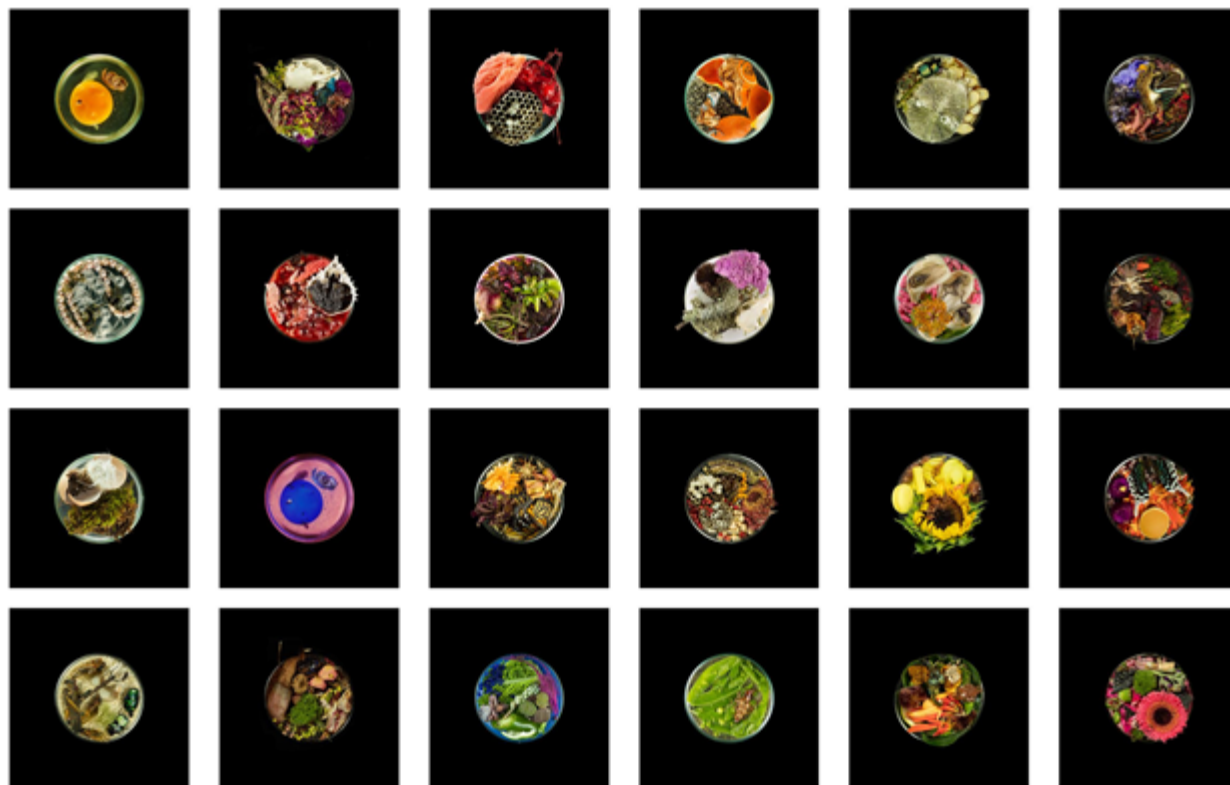


Figure 11. Suzanne Anker, *Vanitas (in a Petri dish)*, inkjet prints on archival paper, 2013

Like Anker, I create contemporary vanitas that reference science-laboratory created life. My pseudo specimens are displayed on or near microscope slides and Petri dishes. The cold, sterile, and distanced interaction with nature in a laboratory is similar to the mediated, and safe interaction with nature that technology provides us. We learn about nature in a laboratory, teach nature in a museum, and ponder nature in works of art. I am interested in presentations of nature, such as a distanced observation experienced in a science lab, or the decontextualized specimens in a curiosity cabinet. The *Neon Nature* series presents a cold, science laboratory-like safe view of nature, because this is a representation of the control of the new-nature.



CHAPTER 3  
THESIS WORK



Figure 12. Jessamy McManus, *Synthesis (plastic and plant)*, acrylic and resin on wood panel, 24x24” each, 2017

*Synthesis* is the earliest painting in this collection. In considering what contemporary nature is, I made this painting a diptych to represent the dichotomy between the natural and synthetic. Formally, the main goal of this diptych was to simplify the composition as much as possible and reduce my creature-characters to their most basic shapes. Preliminary sketching eliminated unnecessary brushwork and overcrowded compositions. The process of sketching thumbnail images was similar to the intuitive painting process I used before, because the more I sketched the more certain forms repeated themselves. Whereas in my earlier work, my mind formed “creatures” as I made intuitive brushstrokes, I was now seeing these creatures in the

reduced compositional elements in my sketches. The creatures in *Synthesis* are reduced to their most basic form: a curved line. In the right panel, I imagined the blue-black, pockmarked, resin worm-like form as a protagonist, probing the white block of color and “licking” the gold form.

The concept for this painting is based on the word synthetic. A synthetic material is formed through a chemical process by human agency and a synthetic material is made to imitate the natural. I think painting nature is a way of creating synthetic nature. The painted representation of nature is often a synthesized version: idealized, perfected, often beautified. “Synthesis” in the title alludes to the word photosynthesis, as a natural process for plants, and synthetic, meaning artificially manufactured.

A successful element of this diptych that I continued throughout the rest of the portraits was the gradient background. The gradient background references a pictorial space that is contradicted in *Synthesis* by the flat white blocks of color. Color gradients are also reminiscent of contemporary depictions of nature such as computer screen savers, sunsets and rainbows in advertisements, are a common way to depict present-day nature because a common way we see nature today is through a screen. In the left panel, a gradient of green extending from the leaf imagery, signifies the idea of manipulated nature and synthetic greenery (i.e. plastic plants, or trimmed, genetically modified grass). The patterns on the side of the pink painting reference another common example of manicured nature— a divided line of concrete and dirt on the sidewalk. Lastly, I sealed the pink painting in a layer of resin to amplify the artificial feeling hot pink suggests.

The inkjet photo transfer imagery in the paintings are photos specifically found from Google image searches for computer desktop backgrounds. Computer synthesized nature imagery is another way that the artificial and natural collide. We use technology to comfort



ourselves from the dangers of nature and we decorate technology with scenes of nature to ease use of technology. In her book *Technobiophilia: Nature and Cyberspace*, Sue Thomas explains the pervasiveness of nature-derived metaphors and imagery used in technology and internet such as: web, mouse, cloud, bug, virus, and the images of lush nature that welcome us on the home screen. Thomas believes these metaphors are used in technology because of biophilia, defined by biologist E.O. Wilson as “the innate attraction to life and lifelike processes.” The definition of technobiophilia is the tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes as they appear in technology.<sup>6</sup> Technology mimics nature and synthetic products imitate nature. I think we keep these metaphors and desktop images to make the transition to technology easier, and to retain a level of comfort as technology distances us from the natural world. Unlike an easily divided diptych, there is not a clear divide between the natural and the synthetic in our new-nature.

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<sup>6</sup> S. Thomas. *Technobiophilia: Nature and Cyberspace*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.



Figure 13. Jessamy McManus, *Self-Other*, acrylic on wood panel, 24x36", 2017

I continued to examine this divide between nature and the synthetic in *Self-Other*. This is a painting I made about my feelings of dissociation when it comes to environmental issues. The barriers between nature and technology have blurred and the Anthropocene marks a time where we can no longer regard nature as purely natural. The Anthropocene is defined by author Jedediah Purdy in his book, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, as a geological epoch in which “humans impact everything from the upper atmosphere to the deep sea and the DNA of the world’s species. This condition encompasses a level of species death that many scientists call the globe’s sixth great extinction; increasing toxicity in the water and soil; and the transformation of the planet’s surface by agriculture, cities, and roads. Even wilderness, once the very definition of naturalness, is now a statutory category in U.S. public-lands law.”<sup>7</sup> The Anthropocene means that “nature” is no longer “natural” because it does not exist independently from human activity.

When I refer to “nature” in my artwork, I am referring to anything that is not human or human-made, although I acknowledge that the Anthropocene asserts that there is no such thing as a natural nature at all anymore. The Anthropocene condition means that moving forward, the question is not how to preserve nature, but instead, how to shape it.

The Anthropocene is an abstract concept when you cannot immediately see the effects. The subject in *Self-Other* is a “worm character” from the earlier-painted imagined creatures series used here to portray a scene of looking at nature as “other”. In my imagined creatures series, I illustrated my worm-like characters in scenes of naturally-occurring struggle, such as the prey and predator chase. Here, this worm character is disconnected and passively watching the struggle of nature as “other”.

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<sup>7</sup> J. Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*. Harvard UP, 2015.



Figure 14. Jessamy McManus, *Specimen Portrait (Styrofoam)*, acrylic and resin on canvas, 42x58", 2017

I call my fictitious subjects “pseudo-specimens” because they are a hybrid of plant, human, and synthetic imagery that I morph together, like a mad scientist. My pseudo-specimens are plant, human, and synthetic hybrids that form an entirely new creature. They are portraits that are not of people, and still lifes that are not necessarily still.



Figure 15. *Styrofoam Specimen*, Styrofoam, wood, gold foil, spray paint, human hair, resin, 2017

*Specimen Portrait* is a painting of a three-dimensional Styrofoam specimen I sculpted from found debris found in the woods on my daily walk to the studio. While walking in a wooded or natural area, human-made materials in the landscape, such as a wind-blown plastic bag or a shiny bit of cellophane buried in the pine straw, immediately catch my eye. While at a glance the artificial debris seems to meld into the organic setting, this plastic was never alive, will not biodegrade, and is incompatible to the landscape.

On my walk to the studio I noticed hot pink spray paint marking the ground for construction. The bright pink covered green grass, wood chips, and bits of Styrofoam trash that happened to be in the way. The spray paint was seemingly tagging two extremes of natural and artificial. I collected material from the walk to the studio for a week and combined this natural and artificial material to form this specimen from the pinked Styrofoam, a piece of gold foil, human hair, a twig, and plastic flecks. I coated it in a glaze of resin to preserve it like a true scientific specimen. Then, reminiscent of a 19th century naturalist, I studied and painted this specimen.

In the portrait, the specimen grows from a black seed pod-like structure hovering above a glass microscope slide. The setting is unclear and the shadow is not logical. The suspended specimen surrounded by directional lines implies an almost-moving quality for the subject. I used muted grey colors to create a cold, sterilized setting that is reminiscent to me of a science laboratory. *Styrofoam Specimen* functions as a contemporary vanitas because it combines symbolism of the natural, such as tree twigs, with the epitome of artificiality (Styrofoam) in a quasi-science still life scene on a microscope slide.





Figure 16. Jessamy McManus, *Plant, Animal, Plastic (Vanitas)*, acrylic, resin, inkjet photo transfer on wood panel, 24x24" each, 2017

*Plant, Animal, Plastic* is a diptych created in response to the earlier diptych *Synthesis*. These paintings function more as a pair of portraits than as two parts of whole. Influenced by the pareidolia-seen creatures in brushwork in my earlier paintings, the pseudo-specimen subjects in these paintings are fictional creatures I pull from my dreams. Because social media on my phone, particularly Instagram, makes images instantly and constantly scrollable, I subconsciously absorb a barrage of internet images every day. In a hypnagogic state while waking, when my mind is its most creative, I imagine these hybrid “creatures” from a blur of remembered imagery. Their vividness dilutes as I sketch and then attempt to translate them in paint.

I paint synthetic spaces for my synthetic specimens. The two specimens in *Plant, Animal, Plastic* have a scientific, laboratory-like coldness to them. The left specimen perches on the edge of a white lab table outside their vacant petri dish to feed or dig in dirt. The specimen in the right panel is backed into a corner, poked, and pulled. I chose a table or indoor space as the setting for these specimens to suggest a still life, vanitas scene. Nature and biological material served as symbols of the transitory nature of life, vanity, and the certainty of death and change in 17th century still life vanitas paintings. My rendition of a contemporary vanitas is a still life scene of hypernatural, undead, pseudo-specimens. Traditional vanitas served as a reminder of the mortality of nature, and my vanitas serve as a reminder of immortality of the artificial material in new-nature.





Figure 17. Jessamy McManus, *Petri Spilled (Vanitas)*, acrylic on paper, 72x42", 2017

*Petri Spilled* was directly influenced by the contemporary bio-artist Suzanne Anker's photography series: *Vanitas (in a Petri dish)*. This painting reinforces the concept of manufactured nature in *Neon Nature* with scientific-correlated imagery, including lab gloves and a Petri dish, spilling spliced human-flora matter. I "spliced" leaves with fleshy, meat-colored forms to represent hypernature, formed in Petri dishes.

*"The Petri dish, like a Rorschach inkblot, or DNA's double helix, has become a popular cultural icon. While denotatively, the Petri dish is a covered glass plate used in scientific laboratories, connotatively, it alludes to something brewing under investigation. In this real or imagined container a concept or a substance, if allowed to ferment, will sprout its hidden dimensions."* -Suzanne Anker<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> S. Anker. "Naturally Hypernatural II: Concepts of Nature." *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, no. 34, Autumn 2015.



Figure 18. Jessamy McManus, *Slide Specimen (Vanitas)*, acrylic on canvas, 72x48", 2017

Along with the Petri dish, I refer to scientific-related imagery in the paintings with white a rectangle shape to represent microscope slides. *Slide Specimen* exemplifies the major themes in this collection, *Neon Nature*. In this work, a tangle of pink neon tube lurches off a microscope slide that floats in an ominous green gradient. As a part of my painting practice, I developed a lexicon of assigned meanings for the colors, shapes, and imagery that I use throughout this body of work. While less animalistic than some of the other specimens, the subject of this portrait is direct in its symbolism because the imagery that composed this subject is referred to in my painting lexicon.

Pink	artificial, fleeting beauty
Green	nature, strong, wild
White	references paint (i.e. gesso, the painting's material)
Gold	frivolity, artificiality, vanity
Round/bulb shapes	organic, animal, life-cycle (eggs)
Foliage imagery	natural, untamed nature, health
Painted foliage	manicured/manipulated nature
Color gradients	technology, "hypernature"
Black shapes	death, shadows/unknown space
Drips	drool or blood, bodily, messy sign of life (sex, death)
Tans/browns	flesh, human flesh, humans as animals
Rectangle shape	microscope slide
Disk shape	petri dish, manufactured life
Noose shape	immortality of artificial things
Worm shape	myself, every lifeform
Hot pink spear	technology, death, raw

The two colors I have used the most in my palette are green and pink. Pink is a color I've always been both drawn to and repelled by, because it's so loaded with contradictory meaning. Pink can be flashy, sexy, and obnoxious, or it can simply be the color of flesh. Naturally, it is the color of our muscle under our skin, and the color of our lips and tongues. Hot pink can be the color of flowers, but it is also the neon sign flashing in a Miami liquor store or a ubiquitous color of plastic toys. Pink operates in many different ways in my work. I think hot pink is both synthetic and raw. I pair green with pink as a contrast in both the hue and in the personal symbolic meaning that I have assigned to these colors. Usually I assign green with the meaning of natural, and pink with the meaning of synthetic, but these meanings are not binary, and the roles can and do switch within my work.

In *Slide Specimen*, I combined these significant shapes, colors, and imagery from my lexicon in a tangled web for the specimen on the slide. While talking about the dichotomy of the artificial vs. natural, it is important to point out the grey areas between the seemingly opposite things. I believe the natural and synthetic are truly a tangled web of "grey area" in our new-nature. There are instances of nature accommodating human made material into the ecosystem such as the 2014 discovery of the wax worm bugs' ability to eat and biodegrade polyethylene plastic. In my lexicon, I assign the colors gold and hot pink to represent artificiality, but these colors can be found in nature. Of course, anything artificial must be created from originally natural material. There is not a clean divide between artificial and natural or humankind and nature, but I do think we use technology to create an artificial environment that detaches us from the real one.





Figure 19. Jessamy McManus, *Nature Morte (Vanitas)*, acrylic on wood panel, 42x48", 2017

*Nature Morte* is the first painting in the series in which I included a depiction of my own hand. Hands in my paintings symbolize humanity and the human manipulation of nature. Issues of human-manipulated nature such as genetically modified foods, medicine, and pollution are relevant issues to everyone, and it's a grippingly large and abstract topic to take on as a painter. By painting these specimens in still life-inspired contemporary vanitas, I consider my own mortality and my role in environmental issues. I am personally conflicted and fearful of hypernature and the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is scary and this painting is dark, mysterious, and looming to reflect those feelings. A noose hangs above a gold-constricted piece of flesh, with a wilting leaf and hand hovering above a black spill. A blend of foliage and Styrofoam from behind the flesh are pierced with a pink beam. *Nature Morte* conveys an ominous and dark feeling that reflects my fears about hypernature.



Figure 20. Jessamy McManus, *Slide Sample*, ink, acrylic paint, and inkjet prints on vinyl, on wood panel, 48x72", 2017

The portrait of the specimen in *Slide Sample* is reminiscent of a microbial specimen, splayed and inspected under a microscope between slipcover and a glass slide. I produced this specimen by dripping ink on clear vinyl like a scientist uses a pipette to transfer liquid onto a microscope slide. The painting process of allowing the ink to run and bleed on vinyl correlates to the liquid painting techniques I gathered from the imagined creatures series. The specimen seemingly hovers above a “slide” rectangle shape that is suggested by the black directional line along the bottom of the left canvas. The biomorphic blob, which is spliced in half by the divide in the canvas, sprouts two arms with wires, leaves, and human hands. I divide the canvas into a diptych in multiple works throughout the *Neon Nature* collection to reference the two-sided



divide between the natural and artificial. This painting is a diptych to reference this not-so-clear divide between artificial and natural, and to “splice” the ink specimen.

Instead of traditional fabric-stretched canvas, this painting is stretched in clear vinyl to allow the viewer to literally “see through” the painting’s pictureplane. I use thin directional lines to suggest a picture space that is disrupted by the flat blocks of pink gradient and green flora pattern. In art history, painters have experimented with new ways to create a sense of visual depth and three-dimensionality on something that is naturally flat. I use flat blocks of color on top of the clear vinyl to reference Modern pictorial flatness. In art critic Leo Steinberg’s “The Flatbed Picture Plane,” he mentions “human sense data” as the cause for seeing worldspace in works of art.<sup>9</sup> Of course, we use the same human posture to view works of art that we use to view the world. In *Slide Sample*, I painted the canvas on the ground, horizontally, looking down so the vinyl functioned as a surface area upon which the materiality of the paint could exist. When displayed upright on the wall, it evokes a picture space to enter. The picture space is based less on the Renaissance picture plane as window, or the Modernist picture as surface, but on the picture plane as slide. The microscope slide itself is an artifact through which humans look to learn about nature as a scientific culture. Similar to how we look at a painting for a worldspace to enter, you can enter a microbial worldspace by looking at a slide through a microscope.

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<sup>9</sup> Steinberg, Leo. “Other Criteria: The Flatbed Picture Plane.” *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*. Oxford UP, 1972, pp. 84.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

Nature has always been my inspiration to paint. Throughout the graduate program, I was introduced to contemporary artists and I began to consider how painting nature engages contemporary issues. Nature painting is an old and often clichéd genre, repeatedly illustrated as pretty, pastoral, and passive. I am interested in the *idea* of nature rather than painting an idealized view of it. The goal of *Neon Nature* is to depict our “new-nature” which is based upon the gripping fact that nature’s genetic and biological roots can, and are, being changed by human manipulation. By painting my dreamed specimens in science laboratory-like still life scenes, I developed a collection of my own hypernatural specimens of new-nature.

The paintings in *Neon Nature* are authentic to me because they are portraits of creatures I developed by imagining them in painted brushstrokes and some were even envisioned in my dreams. These pseudo specimens reflect the curiosity, confusion, and fears I have about our new-nature. The specimens are realistic yet surreal and the scenes of nonsensical space appeal to the imagination. I aim to capture the mysterious and ominous power of nature, rather than its common depiction as compliant and pretty. The painterly exploration of the imagined creatures paintings opened my painting practice to new methods of paint application. The experimentation in social projects like *Creature of Your Things* allowed me to grow my artistic practice by exploring the conceptual aspect of my artwork. Painting nature is another way we attempt to control nature, but the empathy I gained through painting the imagined creature series led to me to see nature in all of its complexity, including its vulnerability.

My contemporary vanitas remind the viewer of the role of humans in this vulnerability, as a way to connect with nature. Whereas, science and technology often provide ways to detach

from or dominate over nature. This manufactured hypernature gives us a false sense of control over nature. Technology not only provides us a safe distance from nature, it also progresses so quickly that it blurs the lines between the natural and artificial to the point of being indistinguishable. Painting nature allows the viewer to take a slower look at nature. With these painted specimens, I hope to engage the viewer in reconsidering the new-nature of today.

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