

# ADAPTATION

A Thesis Submitted to the  
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts  
In the Department of Art and Art History  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

By

RACHEL BROUSSARD

## PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis/dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Postgraduate degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this thesis/dissertation in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor or professors who supervised my thesis/dissertation work or, in their absence, by the Head of the Department or the Dean of the College in which my thesis work was done. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this thesis/dissertation or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis/dissertation.

Requests for permission to copy or to make other uses of materials in this thesis/dissertation in whole or part should be addressed to:

Head of the Department of Art & Art History Murray Building,  
University of Saskatchewan 3 Campus Drive  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A4 Canada

OR

Dean College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
University of Saskatchewan 116 Thorvaldson Building, 110 Science Place  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C9 Canada

## *Acknowledgements*

I acknowledge the land where I have lived and studied for the past three years is Treaty 6 Territory and Homeland of the Métis. I pay my respect to the First Nations and Métis ancestors of this place and reaffirm our relationship with one another.

Thank you to the many individuals who assisted in the realization of my thesis exhibition, *Adaptation*. I have tremendous gratitude to my supervisor, Alison Norlen for her generosity, humor, and guidance, and to my committee, Joan Borsa, Jon Bath, and Lisa Birke for their inspiring instruction over the past two years. Thank you to the faculty and staff of the Art and Art History department, in particular Marcus Miller, Barbara Reimer, Janice Weber, and Joseph Anderson for the many questions answered. I extend gratitude for the financial assistance I received from the University of Saskatchewan Graduate Scholarship during my time in the MFA program.

Thank you to my fellow MFA candidates for your friendship and conversation over the years. A special thanks to Negar Tajgardan, Lucas Morneau, Fatemeh Ebrahimnejadnamini, Will Lee, Nicholas Peat, and Gabriela Garcia-Luna for all that you shared with me. Thank you to my extended community of artists and cultural workers here in Saskatoon. You make this city a vibrant and welcoming place to find a home. Finally, thank you to my family Alan, Brenda, Amy, and Erin for your love from afar, Susan and Leif for introducing me to beautiful Saskatchewan, and Kaley for always having a song.

## Table of Contents

Permission to Use .....	i
Acknowledgements .....	ii
Table of Content .....	iii
<i>Adaptation</i> .....	1
Artistic Influences.....	6
<i>Adaptation</i> in the Gordon Snelgrove Gallery .....	12
Conclusion .....	18
Works Cited .....	19

## *Adaptation*

*Adaptation* is an installation that offers a view of the Anthropocene, “the geological epoch in which we are living...conceived as being the period when humans became agents of ecological destabilization” (Boettger 9). Through collage sculptures, composed from glossy coffee table nature photography books found at Saskatoon’s used book sales, I critique the human tendency to commodify the natural world. Some of these books depict scenes and creatures from tropical locations, and some depict flora native to North America. I morph these images with sculpting, collage, and paper cutting to create bizarre transformations that reflect the chaos of human intervention in nature and the mayhem caused by insatiable human curiosity. I transform the flowers of North America into fantastical hybrid creatures that levitate above the ground; I merge tropical fish and coral into alien bodies that are both alluring and grotesque; I encourage rainforest animals and vegetation to cross pollinate and mutate into unique and sometimes malicious species. I sliced through the collage surfaces with lace like cut-out patterns that sometimes organically follow the veins of the creatures, like the consumptive trail left behind a caterpillar munching on a leaf, and sometimes appear as geometric designs. On the one hand, the cut-outs aesthetically enhance these figures, but they also weaken them, making them vulnerable, structurally weak, frail and delicate like the impact of many of our human processes upon the natural environment. By bringing all of these sculptural collages together in the gallery, I compose an environment that mirrors the landscapes of the Anthropocene. It is an environment cobbled together from native, introduced, and invasive species. *Adaptation* beckons the viewer to question the line between what is natural, and what is the product of human intervention.

I am simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by the nature photography books that are the main source of my material for *Adaptation*. I am curious about the ways these slick coffee table books represent and exoticize nature through alluring images that supposedly provide access to places and species unattainable in daily life. They immerse one in a polished fantasy, artifice, and a contradiction. Instead of engaging us in the “natural world,” the images provide a dramatically lit, unnatural space which becomes a theatrical stage on which the drama of nature performs according to a man-made script.

I incorporated paper cutting early on during my MFA work. My first paper cut pieces were made from road maps I found during my thrift store and garage sale expeditions (Fig. 1). Coming from Louisiana and moving to Saskatchewan, the maps became a way to understand and examine my new home, becoming an aerial dissection of the geographical overview of Saskatchewan. My intricate cutting out and removing of the land between the roads became a cathartic investigation and analysis of how our modern human pathways violently dissect landscapes. After cutting, the map that is left displays a vulnerable infrastructure like the veins of a leaf or butterfly wing. Because of my own frequent interstate travel between family in the southern gulf coast of the USA and family in southern Ontario, I am especially aware of roads as a human occupation of the land. Highways become like arteries for human movement, and the places between the roads fall away as cars speed through them. It became clear that as people spend more time on the road, they spend much less time encountering the natural places that are left. Symbolically, this process became a way to trace my own physical travel to my new personal location.

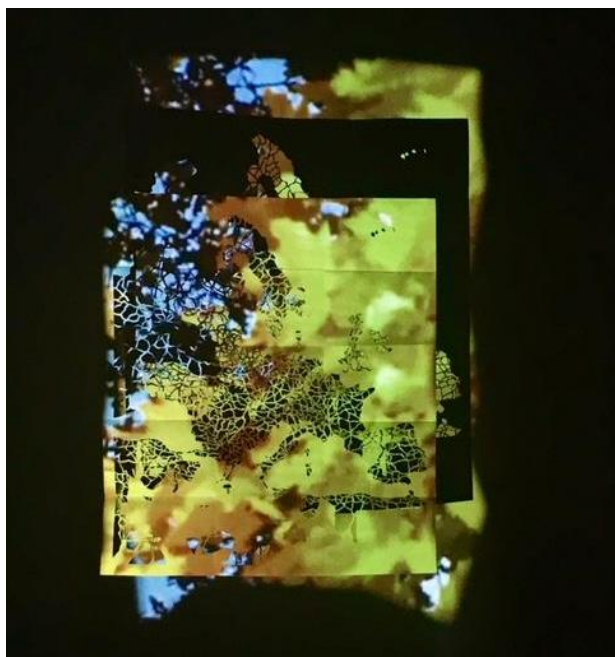


Fig. 1. Rachel Broussard. *Falling Roads*. 2017. paper and video projection of found footage. Artist's collection, Saskatoon, SK.

For months after arriving in Saskatoon in 2016, I collected used books at thrift stores and fundraising sales, and I gravitated towards books about Canadian nature. Moving to Saskatchewan from south Louisiana, I felt a need to familiarize myself with this new place. After spending most of my life in rural areas, my idea of place is connected to the biota surrounding me. While there are many differences between the prairies of Saskatchewan and the prairies of South Louisiana, a significant difference is the six months that the prairies north of the 49th parallel spend blanketed in snow. In the absence of vegetation during the long winter months, I noticed how much the plant life that surrounds me fuels my sense of place. The more I researched the flora I associated with my home in Louisiana, the more I came to realize how many of the plants that grow in Louisiana are exotic or invasive species that people cultivated there for agriculture or for ornament. This fostered my view that our environments are a type of

collage of the native and the foreign, and oftentimes, the plants or animals have become so familiar that they become emblematic of a place.

The act of cutting photos from the pages of nature books is an act of familiarization. I may not encounter the plants' physical forms, but I at least recognize the intricacies of their shapes and colors. In this way, cutting is a type of close investigation, like a forensic scientist seeking to acquaint themselves with the interiority of their subject, and like a form of drawing. When drawing, the artist intimately explores an object with her eyes and tool; when I cut, I do the same with my blade. The fields of color in an image form shapes that my blade differentiates from the background of the photographs. The interior cut-outs I make along the veins of the flora and fauna or the geometric designs I add to the surface become like cross-contour lines in a drawing. They enhance the forms and give them volume. I do not memorize the scientific information as I cut through the books. My practice is about separating these beings from the prescriptive and idealized categorization that confined them to the binding of a book for the quick fix of nature consumption. Through constructing them as hand-crafted multiples, I bring them closer to the truth of nature in the 21st century: a nature hybridized and mutated by the industrial work of humanity.

When I began making collage sculptures, I worked only with images of plants, and I was hesitant to move on to cutting out images of animals. It is easier to cut pictures of flowers and leaves because of the quotidian cutting of flowers or shrubs in a garden. At first, cutting apart the photos of animals was more challenging. Now, as I slice through sections of their scales or fur on the pages, I think of the manatees scarred or killed by boat propellers; I think of sea turtles choked by plastic waste; I think of orangutans that are displaced from their habitats by palm oil harvests. The marks I make in the paper reflect the plights of these animals, and when the images



are cut from their pages and hung in the gallery to flutter in the air currents, they have the potential to reanimate. When I compose the flowers into creatures that resemble animals, I have a sense of bringing something to life. In my practice, piecing together a collage feels like putting together a puzzle. Somehow, I can take the flora and fauna that are separated from one another by the pages of a book and reconnect them, as if recalling their interdependence and the larger habitats that support them. The collages are representations of the symbiotic relationships these beings share in their natural surroundings.

I changed my approach to my collage sculptures when I realized my interest in the representations of these plants in the coffee table books stems from my own experience of displacement. When I began the collage sculptures, I was working only with plant images, and I referred to my hybrid creatures as my GMOobiles. This reference to the genetic modification of plants helped me to experiment with the forms of the wildflowers in the same way scientists splice the genes of different species. The GMOobiles imagine a future where not even native flowers, considered superfluous to agricultural research, are safe from the exploits of genetic modification. While I transitioned to a new environment, I also learned how to adapt my art practice. Some of these changes came from practical necessity. On the level of materials and technical execution, second-hand books appealed to me as they are portable, inexpensive, and part of a recycling economy that I subscribe to. Some of my adaptation came from the desire to be surrounded by plant and animal life during the long winter, and some came from the freedom realized in new circumstances. As I developed a visual vocabulary for my new habitat, I began to recall the work of some of my favorite artists that I had yet to fully explore.

### *Artistic Influences*

I primarily investigated three established artists for thematic inspiration as well as technical and practical applications during my time in the MFA program. Artists Hannah Hoch, Wangechi Mutu, and Geoffrey Farmer all engage in practices that dissect how mass media representations generate mutations of humanity and society. While their methods vary, the common technique of collage leads to similarities between the themes these artists choose: specifically, how mainstream media warps perceptions of the body and the impact of industrialization on society. In Weimar Germany, between World Wars I and II, Hannah Hoch grappled with the schizophrenic society surrounding her by creating photomontages of distorted bodies. Contemporary African American artist, Wangechi Mutu, responds to the depiction of African women's bodies post-diaspora with cut outs gleaned from lifestyle and porn magazines. Contemporary Canadian artist, Geoffrey Farmer's dense collage installations give a glimpse into Western society's collective imagination with popular icons from art history and mass media extracted from the pages of widely syndicated texts such as *Life* magazine and art encyclopedias. By analyzing and reconfiguring images produced by mass media, these artists offer a critical view of the preoccupations of history and contemporary society.

While their themes may be similar, each of these innovative collage artists has a unique technical approach to the art of collage, which is influenced by the dominant artistic trends of their times. Hannah Hoch primarily worked in 2-D using common images from monthly or quarterly magazine publications. Wangechi Mutu works in 2-D collages, installation, and time-based collage through video. Her main collage materials are common images from monthly or quarterly magazine publications much like Hoch, but she also incorporates drawing and painting into her works. Geoffrey Farmer, whose career developed during the same period as Mutu,

primarily works in 3-D collage and installation, and he utilizes illustrations and photos from encyclopedias and magazines combined with other materials such as fabric and found objects. In my MFA exhibition, I primarily work with collage in 3-D and installation and source my images from large format photo publications. Just as the visuals of one generation build on the preoccupations of the one before it, these artists build on the collage traditions of the artists who preceded them. My own work builds on these traditions, but it also responds to pressing environmental issues caused by humanity's neglect of the complex web of life forms on Earth.

Hannah Hoch is considered one of the leading collage artists of the 20th century. She is known by many people as the lone woman of the Dada movement; however, her career as a photomontage artist stretched far beyond that time. She gleaned the materials for her artworks from popular magazines of the day. By doing so, she is able to offer direct critique of the material and representations she utilizes. The contradiction in Hoch's practice comes from her obvious enjoyment of the publications she dissects. As noted by cultural historian, Maud Lavin, "Hoch never relinquished the pleasure of representing mass media photographs of women, as is evident throughout her Weimar work... On multiple levels, Hoch both criticized and reproduced the media's representation of women in her day" (5). I relate to Hoch's interest in readymade media images. While I do not agree with the methods and outcomes of the nature photographers I utilize, I enjoy the aesthetic qualities of their images that I warp for my own purposes. Hoch does not take a lofty stance above her audience, damning them for their participation in mass syndication. Instead, she acknowledges the appeal of these texts, while offering her own interpretation of them. Her articulations suggest an astute criticality as if saying: *I am an engaged reader. You try to control my gaze, but I see things my own way.*

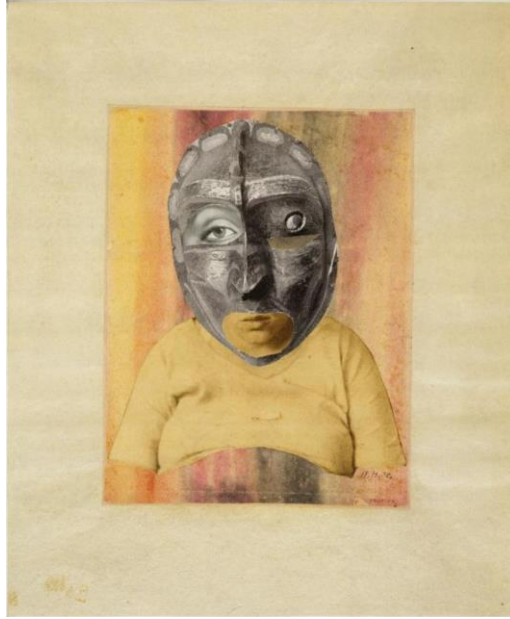


Fig. 2. Hannah Hoch. *Mutter*. 1930. Centre Pompidou, Paris. *Centre Pompidou*. Web. 8 January 2019.

Wangechi Mutu's work demonstrates the ability of collage to disrupt and reconfigure a singular text and viewpoint. For example, in the series *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* (Fig. 3), Mutu uses a single book titled *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* as the basis for her twelve collages which critique the absence of black women from western mass media and its promotion of female beauty standards. Mutu creates an implied mask of brown paper around her figure's head that behaves more like a bandage after cosmetic surgery. The figure is composed of the eyes and nose of a black woman from a fashion ad, a pair of luscious magazine lips, and a catalogue image of a white woman. The white woman dominates the space that would belong to the black woman's brain showing her preoccupation with beauty standards presented by western media. I cut geometric designs out of the surface of my collages to reference the damage humans cause to the environment, and Wangechi Mutu paints, draws, or cuts wounds on her collage figures to reference years of abuse and violence incurred by African bodies at the hands of the slave trade. Schoonmaker reflects, "Mutu uses wounds on her female

figures, the backgrounds of her collages, and on the walls of her installations as a reminder that old wounds have yet to heal and that new atrocities continue to be committed” (31). Wounds are visible in Wangechi Mutu’s portraits from the *Family Tree* (Figs. 4, 5) series. This installation traces generations of twelve increasingly mutilated and disjointed figures who illustrate the pain of colonized bodies through a matriarchal creation myth of Mutu’s own invention.



Fig. 3. Wangechi Mutu. *Adult Female Sexual Organs*. 2005. Saatchi Gallery, London, UK. Saatchi Gallery. Web. 8 January 2019.



Fig. 4. Wangechi Mutu. *Family Tree (Original Sky)*. 2012. Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Trinity, NC. *Curiator*. Web. 9 January 2019.

Fig. 5. Wangechi Mutu. *Family Tree (Stabbed Spouse)*. 2012. Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Trinity, NC. *TOMBOY*. Web. 9 January 2019.

My interest in hand-crafted multiples rendered from ephemeral texts is an interest I share with artist Geoffrey Farmer. Farmer created 365 puppets in *The Surgeon and the Photographer* (Fig. 6,7). He uses pieces of fabric to mold the bodies of his characters, and then adheres paper appendages clipped from popular magazine images. The mass of figures he assembles into a cluster becomes a crucial part of understanding Farmer's work. In an interview for *Border Crossings* magazine, Farmer compared his process of piecing together an installation to that of a person packing for a solo flight at home and being thrust into the bustling airport the next morning. He says, "when you get to the airport everyone is coming together and your narrative is obliterated by the nature of being processed in this social form... Similarly, in my own work all the labour and specificity disappear... It's not about the preciousness of the cutout form, but something else is being conveyed" (qtd. in Enright 13). That something else could be the mass of consumables created during the age of mechanical reproduction. In *Adaptation*, the individuality

of each collage figure is less important than the sense of these figures gathering in a symbiotic chaos.



Fig 6. Geoffrey Farmer. *The Surgeon and the Photographer*. 2009. Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver,BC. TATE. Web. 9 January 2019.

Fig 7. Geoffrey Farmer. *The Surgeon and the Photographer*. 2009. Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver,BC. Culture24. Web. 9 January 2019.

In my own work, it is not the human form that is being fragmented, it is plant and animal forms. Through processes like genetic modification, industrialization's impact on the natural world has created widespread "ecological destabilization" (Boettger 9). This view of the Anthropocene is central to my explorations. Hoch saw human bodies being torn apart by war, and I see plant and animal bodies being swollen and distorted with hormones. My creatures in *GMOBILE* (Fig. 8,9) are composed of severed plant images that have been glued into a whole. Like Mutu and Farmer's work, these pieces are displayed in a cluster, so the individual work is dwarfed by the process of reproduction. Hoch's *Puppen* appear as singularly crafted items that illustrate the mechanization of man, but with Mutu's *Family Tree*, Farmer's *Surgeon*, and my *GMOBILE*, the artists display their concern for the rapid production in our mechanized times through their painstakingly labor intensive multiples.

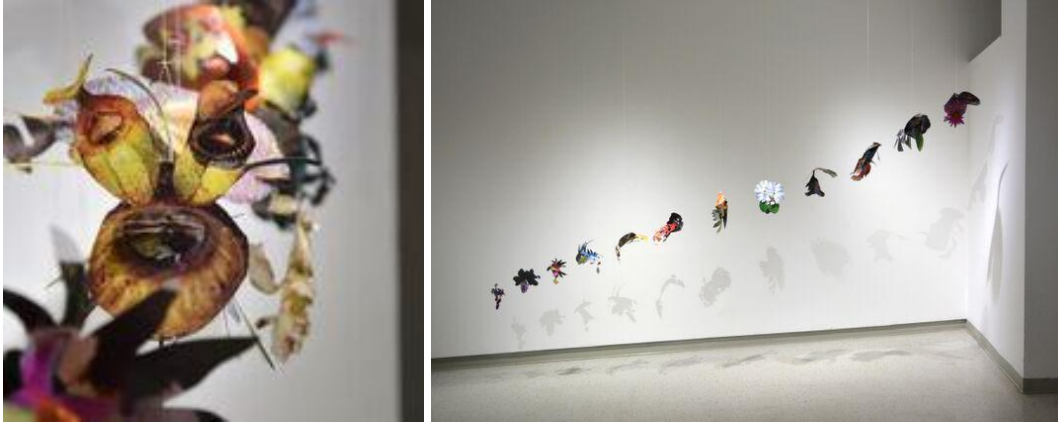


Fig 8. Rachel Broussard. *GMOBILE*. 2018. Selected images from various botany books. Artist's collection, Saskatoon, SK.

Fig 9. Rachel Broussard. *GMOBILE Installation*. 2018. Selected images from various botany books. Artist's collection, Saskatoon, SK.

#### *Adaptation in the Gordon Snelgrove Gallery*

A delicate tapestry composed of paper tropical flowers hangs a few feet from the entrance of the Gordon Snelgrove Gallery (Fig. 10). It is spot-lit, and it hangs close to a central column that becomes draped with the shadows of the cut flowers. These flowers came from the book *Remains of a Rainbow*, published 2001. The photographs were taken by naturalist photographers intent on documenting the disappearing plants of the Hawaiian islands. The plants were threatened by the agriculture introduced by the first colonizers of Hawaii and now they remain threatened by the tourism brought to these islands. I secured the flower patterns to one another by green twist-ties. These ties, commonly used in market gardening, reference the agricultural market that damaged the delicate ecology that thrived in Hawaii before western settlers arrived in the 18th and 19th centuries. The dappled shadow of the flower tapestry falls onto the form of the column behind it. The contrast between the ephemeral form of the flowers and the sturdy pillar



mirrors the relationship between the fragility of the natural environment and the harsh control of the human industries that impose themselves upon the land.



Fig. 10. Rachel Broussard. *Remains of a Rainbow*. 2018-2019. Book Pages and twist ties. Artist's collection, Saskatoon, SK.

At the center of the gallery, a swarm of suspended creatures clusters (Fig. 11). These are composed of images clipped from Canadian wildflower books, such as *Canadian Wildflowers Through the Seasons* and *Wildflowers of Canada*, published 1982 and 1989 respectively. As a way to familiarize myself with the flora that is native to the Canadian landscape, I turned these flowers into hybrid forms that resemble animals. Their forms are hybrids of many plants, and their shadows take these distortions further. Their shadow forms cast onto the wall and floor ominously behind them. Because of developments in industries such as factory farming and resource extraction across Canada, the habitats of many of these plants are threatened. The

mutation and distortion allude to this haunting of an environment that humanity has created through the manipulation of the landscape.



Fig. 11. Rachel Broussard. *Canadian Wildflowers Through the Seasons, Wildflowers of Canada, and GMOBILE*. 2018- 2019. Book Pages. Artist's collection, Saskatoon, SK.

The viewer is taken off the land and into the sea through the aquatic pinup series (Fig. 12) that dances in the right portion of the gallery. The book I used for this series is a large format glossy photo book, *Rainbow Under the Sea*, published 1990. This book aestheticizes, idealizes, and objectifies marine life to such an extreme that the creatures become seductive objects of pleasure, much like porn magazines do with the female body in pinup photos. This approach promotes a voyeurism of the animals that separates them from the places they inhabit and the complexity of social patterns they occupy. Anthropomorphized aquatic forms that I collaged into monstrous aliens are installed on bamboo poles that are anchored in pails of sand and stand as tall as the ceiling. Bamboo poles serve as reminders of the harm caused to reefs by the industrialized fishing industry and reference the kind of building materials used in tropical locales. The sand reconnects the figures to their natural habitat. Many of the photos are

aestheticized to a point where the reference to the form of their source, fish and coral, is lost. Instead of seeing the creatures as living beings within a habitat, they are presented as flat fields of color. *Rainbow Under the Sea* proves that in this consumer age, anything can be turned into a commodity.



Fig. 12. Rachel Broussard. *Aquatic Pin Ups*. 2019. Book pages, bamboo, pails, sand. Artist's collection, Saskatoon, SK.

A rainforest appears to sprout in the left side of the gallery, and there the animals and plants merge together as if they grow from one another (Fig. 13). Some of these hybrids grow from evenly rounded coconut mounds on the floor, and some dangle like vines from the ceiling. The absence of support for these animals reflects the absence of the habitats surrounding them in the photos from which they are cut. Many of the images are macro and focus on just the plants or animals individually, and do not contextualize them within their habitats or depict them as interconnected cohabitating species. By melding their forms, I bring them together to reflect the symbiotic relationships they have with each other and their environment. The rainforest creatures that emerge from the coconut islands on the ground have a direct relation to North American

suburban gardens. In North America, these coconut liners are sold at garden stores to line hanging flower baskets for a more “natural” look, and they are made from coir, the fibrous part of coconut shells between their hard outer shell and the white pulp of their fruit. One of the world’s largest exporters of coir is Sri Lanka, which is home to the Sinharaja Rainforest. This is the last remnant of rainforest in Sri Lanka, and a large part of the destruction of the rainforest is due to palm plantations. While the people of North America are accustomed to seeing their petunias emerging from these coconut liners, halfway around the world the overharvesting of the source of these liners endangers the species of plants and animals who are native to the rainforest. *Adaptation* places the rainforest creatures in proximity to these everyday mass-produced objects to remind the viewer of the wide-spread repercussions of consumerism.



Fig. 13. Rachel Broussard. *Rainforest*. 2019. Book pages, coconut fibre, floral foam. Artist’s collection, Saskatoon, SK.

A trio of large paper collage sculptures hang from thick steel chains (Fig. 14) directly across from the rainforest corner. If the viewer looks closely at the small flower creatures hanging at the center of the gallery, she may notice that these are evolved forms of three of the

first GMOobiles I made. It is a trio collaged from images in both books and magazines, and the creatures are a combination of both Canadian wildflowers and exotic plants. I scanned the images, enlarged them to 4x the original size, and printed them on archival photo paper. All the other collages in *Adaptation* are made with recycled materials, and since these “evolved” forms are the only sculptures made from virgin paper, they are chained to birch bark to remind the viewer of the paper’s origin. While it is not certain if the archival photo paper used for these sculptures uses birch in its makeup, the bark is a reminder of the Canadian forests from which the paper pulp may have been harvested, a reminder that human creation is bound to the animate beings of the Earth.



Fig. 14. Rachel Broussard. *Pink Creature (Evolved)*, *Blue Creature (Evolved)*, *Yellow Creature (Evolved)*. 2018. Archival digital prints, birch bark, chain. Artist’s collection, Saskatoon, SK.

## Conclusion

Born out of increasing awareness of my own environmental footprint, *Adaptation* encourages a critical engagement with the phenomenon of the Anthropocene. Rather than leaving the mass-produced images that occupy coffee table nature books in their bindings to become part of the waste cycle of consumer society, I give them a new life through time, attention, transformation, and the creative process of collage. In *Adaptation*, the viewer encounters a diversity of plant and animal life in a distorted way, so it beckons the viewer to analyze the lines between nature and the product of human manipulation. Although the glossy and commodified representations exploit their subjects, nature photography books can also promote an awareness of these fragile habitats and the creatures that live there; they allow access to otherwise distant, unattainable hidden places. *Adaptation* seeks a balance and investigates the darkness of the Anthropocene, offering an experience of the exotic that responds to humanity's innate curiosity about the mystery, pleasure, and forms of knowledge nature offers. Finally, the viewer can leave *Adaptation* valuing what is greater than human.



Fig. 14. Rachel Broussard. *Adaptation* (installation view). 2018. Mixed media. Artist's collection, Saskatoon, SK.

## Works Cited

- Boettger, Suzaan. "The Mirror of Our Nature: Edward Burtynsky's Images of the Anthropocene." *Anthropocene*, by Edward Burtynsky et al., Steidl, 2018, pp. 9–16.
- Enright, Robert. Walsh, Meeka. "The Multitudinous See." *Border Crossings*, Border Crossings, March 2017, <https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/the-multitudinous-see>.
- Lavin, Maud. *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: the Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Hoch*. Yale University Press, 1993.
- Schoonmaker, Trevor. "A Fantastic Journey". *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*, edited by Trevor Schoonmaker, Duke University Press, 2013, pp. 21-47.