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These fragments of text and collection of images bridge periods Eline McGeorge spent working and researching in Colombia and Norway. The collection coheres around the leitmotif of the 'biomat', a multi-species shape-shifting character that assembles and disassembles depending on the situation. The narrative begins in the present time of writing and working during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in Oslo and, through a series of keywords, explores the subjects that have occupied McGeorge's recent work.

3

BIOMATIC

5

LOCKDOWN DRAWINGS

10

ALGAE, CNIDARIA, ZOOIDS

25

EYES

42

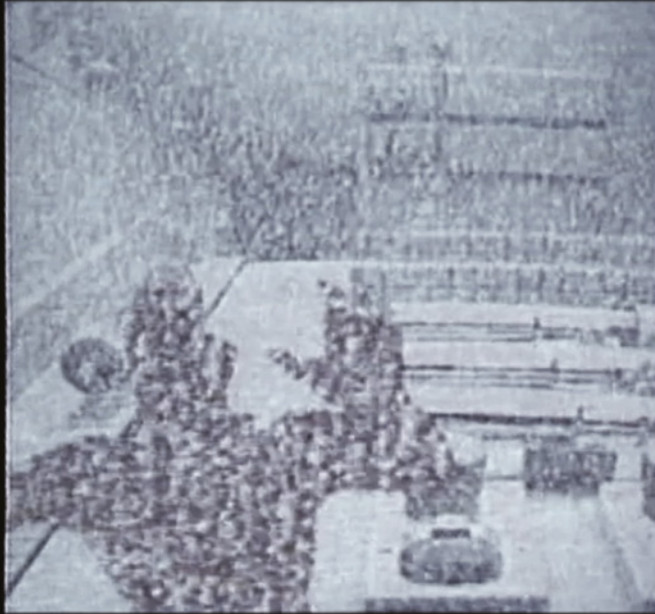
SEEDS

BIOMATIC

For the last few years of my practice I have been interested in concepts that resonate with my thinking around the 'biomat'. I first encountered this term through a Norwegian TV series from the 1970s called *Blindpassasjer* (which translates to 'Stowaway' or 'Free Rider'), in which the biomat, a cyborg-like character made of programmable molecules, appears as a human figure. The character plays the role of a guardian of nature on a red planet newly discovered by humans, a role that runs into conflict with the crew members of a Norwegian starship, who eventually terminate the biomat to clear way for their expedition.

I became interested in the biomat's ability to become anything, anywhere, to take the form of different entities and beings through its capacity to dissolve and redistribute, to extend itself, or to retreat into fragments or pixels. The biomat's capacities are not local but extensively distributed across time and space, and in this sense it could be considered a 'hyperobject'.¹ In my work I conceive of and refer to this set of characteristics, as well as the potential for guardianship, as 'biomatic'. The biomat is not a fully defined character but a shape-shifter that I expand on as a form to think with in relation to interlinked paradoxes and ambiguities, as well as the limits of binary forces and energies that structure minds and worlds, such as good/bad, human/animal, male/female.

1. My usage of 'hyperobject' derives from Timothy Morton, who uses the term to refer to entities of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that they defeat traditional ideas about what a thing is, and, consequently, how we think, coexist, and experience our politics, ethics, and art.



With the Free Rider into the Oil Age and Beyond, 2014 [still]

Video montage and animation, sound, 12-minute loop
(Source material from the TV series *Blindpassasjer* is used
with rights from Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation)

For humans, the biomat represents both threat and guardianship, enemy and protector. The biomat might be the enemy of those who aim for short-term gain by exploiting other humans or animals and plants. In this sense, I suppose the biomat is the enemy of most of us who are living within extraction economies and anthropocentric cultures. I think of the biomat as embodying a paradox – it might be our enemy and at the same time our guardian by dint of its capacity to protect nature, of which humans are a part.

Since I made the video work *With the Free Rider into the Oil Age and Beyond* in 2014, most of the characters populating my work expand on the idea of the potential 'afterlife' or re-appearance of biomatic forces that were seemingly terminated in the 1970s TV series. This includes the contemporary conflicts that biomatic forces might be involved in and the various ways they can manifest today, as both real and fictional entities or forces. The biomatic appears in my work in myriad forms: as creatures, as abstracted representations of its capacities, and as a method to contextualise the powers at work within the topics I research.

LOCKDOWN DRAWINGS

When the lockdown in response to the coronavirus pandemic was introduced in Oslo, I was working on a tapestry expanding on the form and skin patterns of the wrasse. Wrasse is a species of fish I used to catch from the shore of the Oslo Fjord. They have strong lips and teeth and eat the small shells and crustaceans in the seaweeds along the shore. Because of these characteristics, wrasses are now caught and transported to salmon fisheries, where they are put to use as cleaner fish for salmon lice. In these fishery net pens, wrasses only live for a few months. 50 million cleaner fish die each year in Norwegian salmon farming, and while such salmon products might be labelled 'organically farmed' because pesticides were not used for the lice, other forms of biological toll are in turn obscured. While I was working on the tapestry, the wrasse's colourful skin patterns that I was portraying dissolved into the background pattern. I was thinking about the logic of profit-making in such extraction economies – the invasive removal of species from their natural habitat, the treatment of life forms as disposable means to an end, the disregard for the short- and long-term costs of such disruptive acts to nature.

Due to the lockdown measures I was unable to return to my studio and consequently had to abandon the wrasse tapestry. Instead I started to work on some watercolours, something I could easily do from home. I made watercolours of the pangolin and its intriguing pinecone-like shell, the suitably engineered armour that covers its body when it curls up to hide from danger. Unfortunately, for this same armour it is poached and trafficked around the globe, its shells removed to be sold as medicine. I wonder, will the current speculation linking the pandemic outbreak to such trafficking of wild animals consequently protect the pangolin from extinction? In my watercolour drawings, I transferred the pattern of the pangolin's protective shell to other figures.

While making these works from home during the lockdown, I was thinking: Who is the biomat within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic? Could it be the virus itself? Could the virus be understood in terms of guardianship of nature? Can the situation of the pandemic force us to look more closely at how our physical health depends on the health of the communities and societies we live in, as well as the health of other forms of life and their habitats? Can the virus help us understand how our health might be directly linked to the livelihood and human treatment of other animals, from wild creatures like pangolins and bats to those confined in industrial farming, as well as the condition of soil health and plant life? Could the virus affect the ways in which we integrate as parts of communities with other forms of life? Can it help us grasp economy and ecology as inextricably linked and reconsider impoverishment as inherent to the way we transform our surroundings into commodities and money?



Biomatic Encounter, Lockdown (Pangolin), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 29.8 × 21 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Lockdown (Yellow/Green Armour), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 29.8 × 21 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Lockdown (Twigs and Cloud), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 29.8 × 21 cm

ALGAE, CNIDARIA, ZOOIDS

Some of the shapes I have been working with are based on small sea creatures such as algae, plankton, and zooids. I started drawing them last summer at my family's seaside cottage where I used to fish. They were inspired by some old books that I found at the cottage, my general concern about the ecological changes that are taking place in the oceans, and a fascination with these sea creatures' queer and complex forms of life. These creatures present us with gender fluidity, a mind-boggling abundance of inspiring life expressions, and ways of co-existence and collective organisation beyond my land-based political imagination and everyday experiences. With their alien appearances and life processes, these creatures might look like forms from outer space if blown up to a larger scale. These tiny creatures are integral to the web of life on earth, producing oxygen and anchoring the food chain, and at the same time they live colourful magic lives dispersed in the ocean or integrated into specialised parts of large organisms, sometimes appearing as entirely different creatures at different stages of their lives.



Biomantic Encounter, Lockdown (Colony Figure), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 34 × 24 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Lockdown (Colony and Hands), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 34 × 24 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Lockdown (Hands), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 34 × 24 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Oslo Fjord Summer (Assembling Eyes), 2019

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 34 x 24 cm

The shapes of the tiny sea creatures appear in my drawings as eyes, hands, and figures that might suggest the presence of the biomat. Some of the biomatic figures I drew during my time at the cottage have hands inspired by zooids gathering in chains, transforming themselves into parts of large organisms as specialised functions or genders needed for the colony, much like how the biomat takes on shape and function through a gathering of programmable molecules.



Biomantic Encounter, Oslo Fjord Summer (Tripled Eyes), 2019

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 20.8 × 14.7 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Oslo Fjord Summer (Doubled Eyes), 2019

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 21 × 14.7 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Oslo Fjord Summer (Dissolving Eyes), 2019

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 34 x 24 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Oslo Fjord Summer (Outlined Eyes), 2019

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 34 x 24 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Oslo Fjord Summer (Zoooid Hand Figure), 2019

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 34 x 24 cm



Biomatic Encounter, Oslo Fjord Summer (Zooid Hand and Eyes), 2019

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 34 x 24 cm

For someone unfamiliar with the ecology of the region around the Oslo Fjord, where my family's cottage is situated, it would be difficult to notice that anything is out of the ordinary. I have known this place intimately since the late 1970s, and being aware that the number of animals on the planet has halved since then, my feeling is that an even greater portion is missing in this place. No matter how much one reads about the sixth extinction, global warming, and so on, there is no other way to truly understand the rapid changes and losses except through firsthand witnessing, seeing how our companion species are struggling, falling silent, unable to go on living in the way they have lived for thousands of years before the arrival of the human species. At the cottage I used to fish cod on a daily basis during the summer break. It must have been during the 1990s when they stopped biting the hook. The seagulls on a nearby roosting island would keep me awake from sunrise, which is early at the beginning of the summer. It has been quiet there since some time during the first decade of this century. The swifts and swallows would zoom past my head in swarms to catch insects, and at times there was so much mackerel in the sea that we could catch more in a few hours than we could keep in our freezer for the winter. These busy flocks and schools haven't been around these past few summers. This spring, I read reports that eider birds were found dead from starvation in the hundreds along the shores. I had already been missing them for a few summers.

The food chain and so much more is broken in the Oslo Fjord, like in so many other places all over the planet. Without the knowledge of the way the rapid changes manifest themselves, without knowing places intimately, being familiar with the different forms of lives that inhabit them, how are we supposed to know how to protect and restore? If we don't even know what we are losing, how can we love it enough to protect it?

I have previously made drawings and prints of biomatic hands holding seeds. I think the hands in my latest lockdown drawings might also be biomatic, or they might be human. In these drawings, something seems to be slipping away, dissolving, being lost. So these works might focus more on the loss of nature than the protection of it, or perhaps the loss of touch with nature.



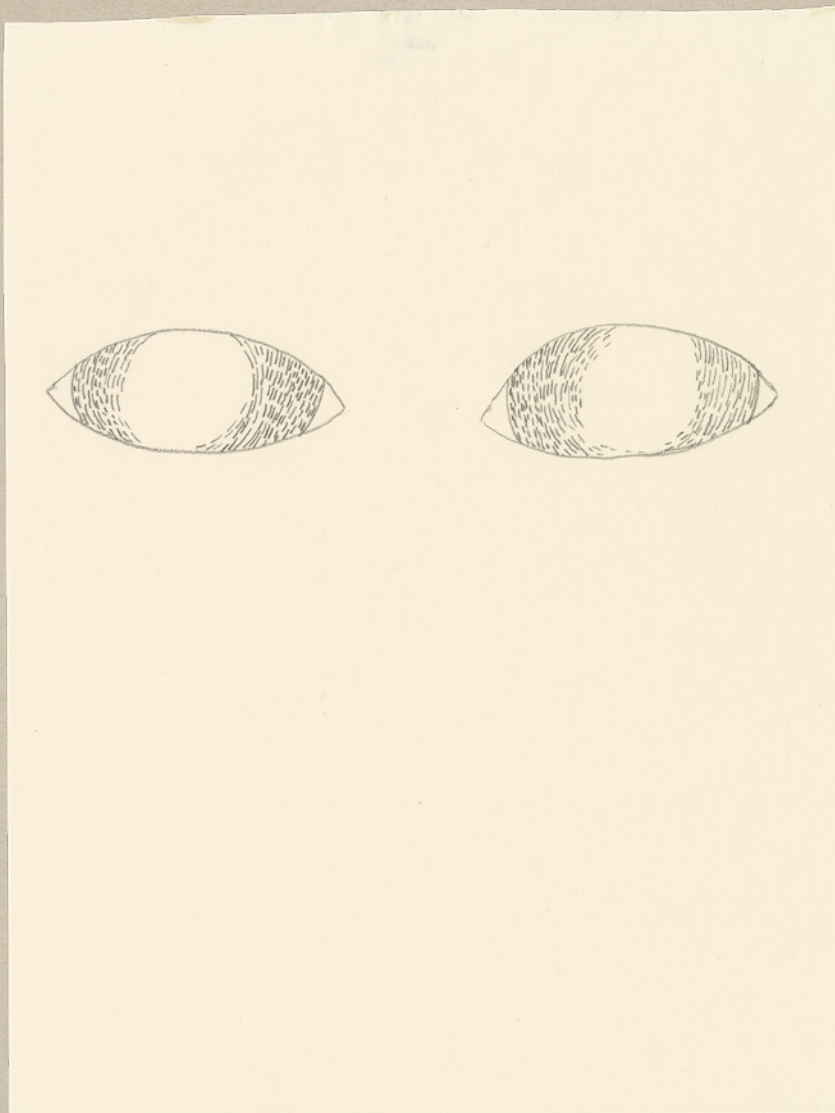
Biomantic Encounter, Lockdown (Hand Constellation 1), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 29.8 × 21 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Lockdown (Hand Constellation 2), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 29.8 × 21 cm

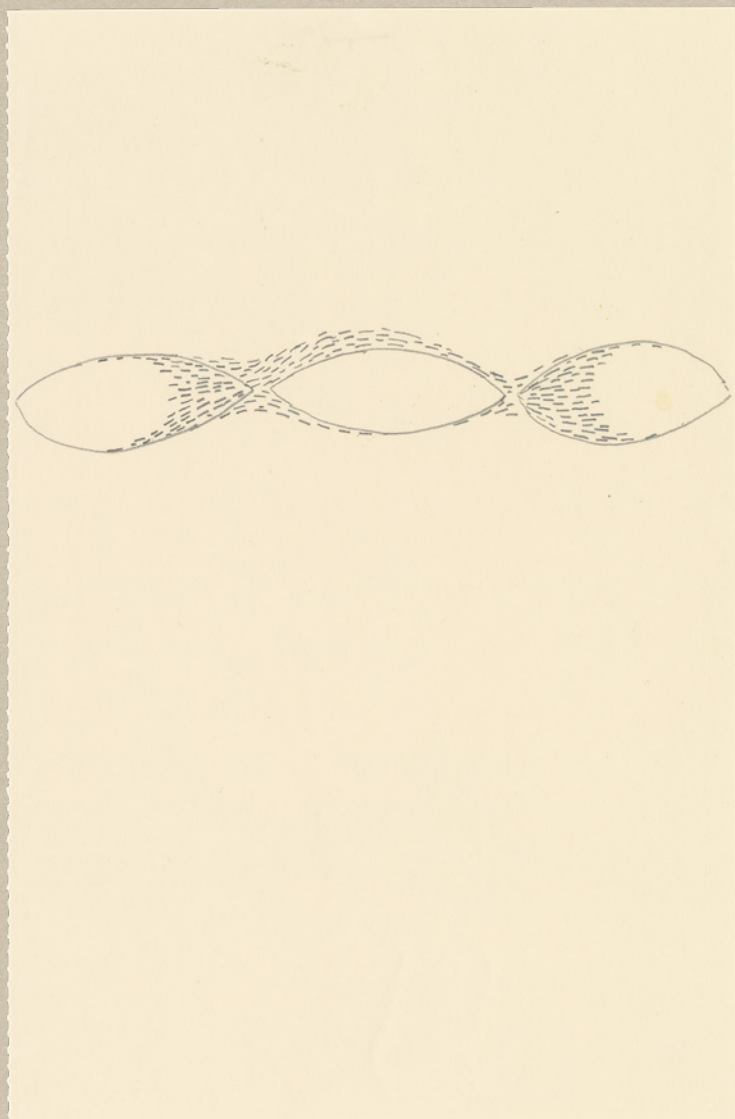


Biomatic Encounter, Eye Drawing (One Set), 2020

Pencil on paper, 20.9 × 15.8 cm

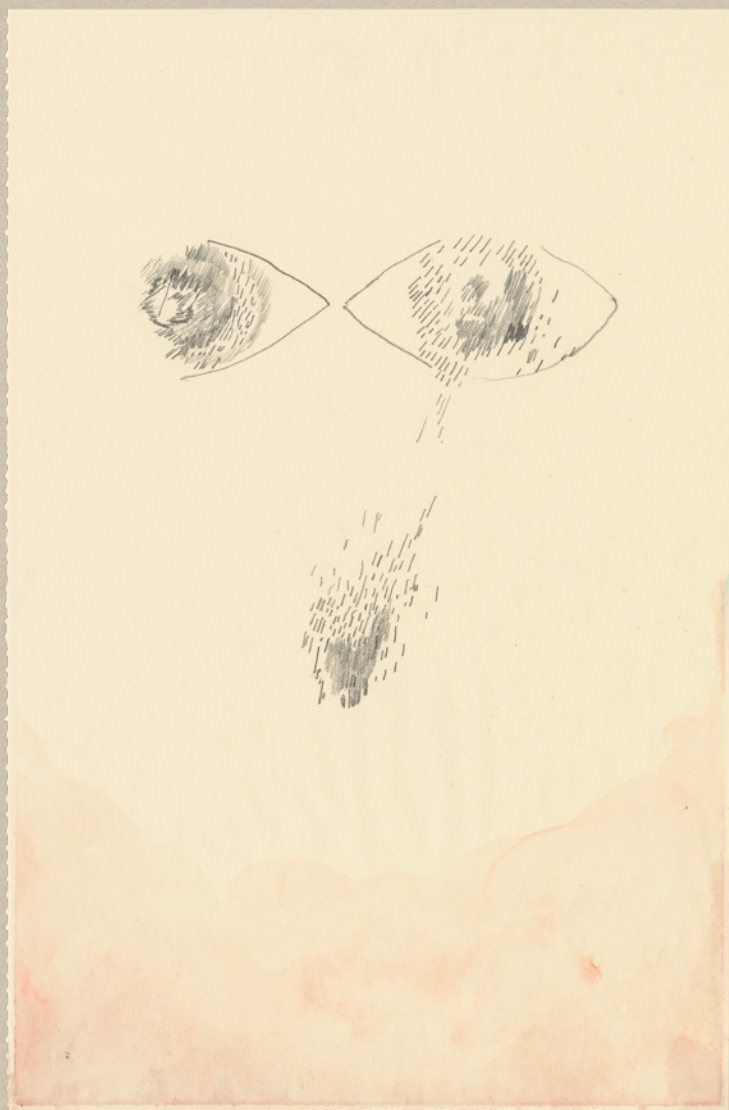
EYES

I started drawing eyes before I travelled to Colombia for a three-month stay at El Parche Artist Residency in Bogotá in February 2019, but the eyes became my main motif during my residency. I thought of them as the eyes of the biomat. Some are made of small pencil lines reminiscent of digital pixilation, perhaps suggestive of biomatic pixels assembling into a form or dissolving into fragments, or an electric distortion in the digital signals transmitted during such transformations.



Biomatic Encounter, Eye Drawing (Triple), 2020

Pencil on paper, 21 × 13.8 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Eye Drawing (Dissolving), 2020

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 21 × 13.8 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Eye Drawing (Assembling), 2020

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 21 × 13.8 cm

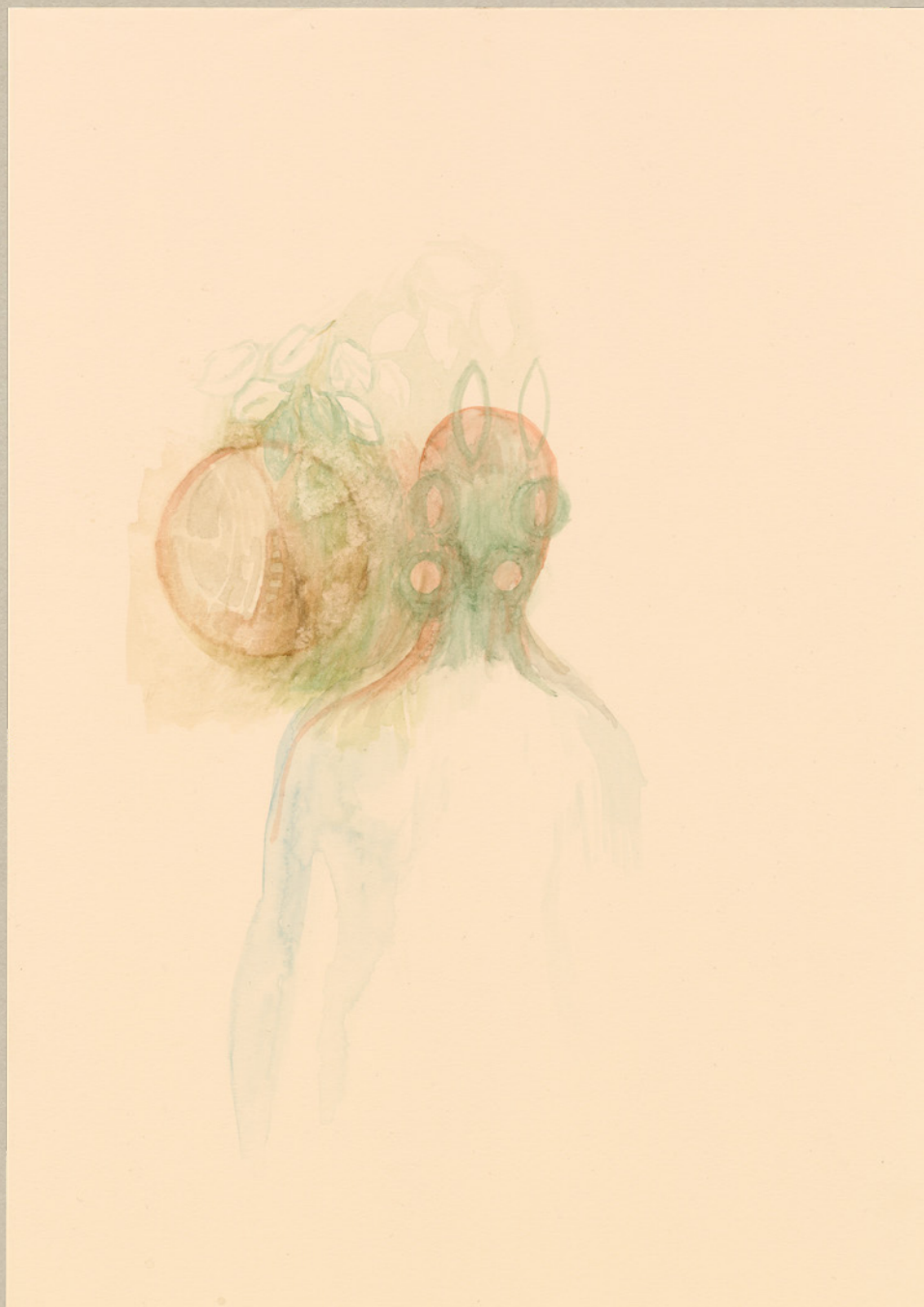
I was interested in thinking about how the biomat might be observing us from its various hybrid positions, shifting between human, animal, inanimate life and digital information. I also played around with hybrid animal eyes with differently shaped pupils and double irises, multiple sets of eyes, and so on. The oblong shapes that recur in the drawings also refer to the shape of eyes and pupils. Some animals have oblong pupils, which I think gives them an unusual, fascinating expression.

In some of the work I made in Colombia, eyes peek out of the dense forests around my studio on the Caribbean coast: animal, human, plant and biomatic eyes. I was thinking about witnessing, who is observing whom. Who *can* as well as *how* to witness in solidarity, and whether witnessing can contribute positively to the situations that I am paradoxically involved in with both the protective intentions of the biomat and the exploitive behaviour of the human crew.



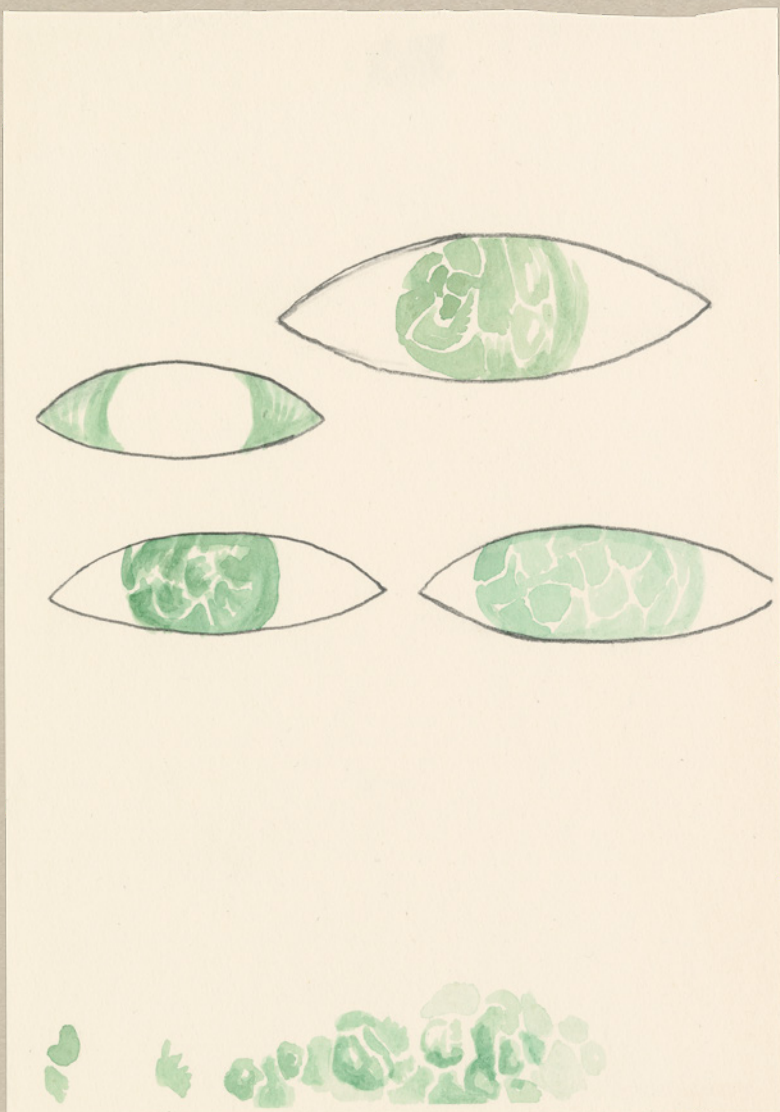
Biomatic Encounter, Eye Drawing (With Green Fragments), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 21 × 14.7 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Lockdown (Red Contour), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 29.8 × 21 cm



*Biomimetic Encounter, Eye Drawing
(Group with Green Fragments), 2020*

Watercolour on paper, 21 × 14.7 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Lockdown (Blue Armour), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 29.8 × 21 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Lockdown (Plant), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 29.8 × 21 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Eye Drawing (Black Background), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 21 × 13.8 cm



Biomatic Encounter, Eyes (Green and Yellow), 2019

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 34.8 × 24.8 cm



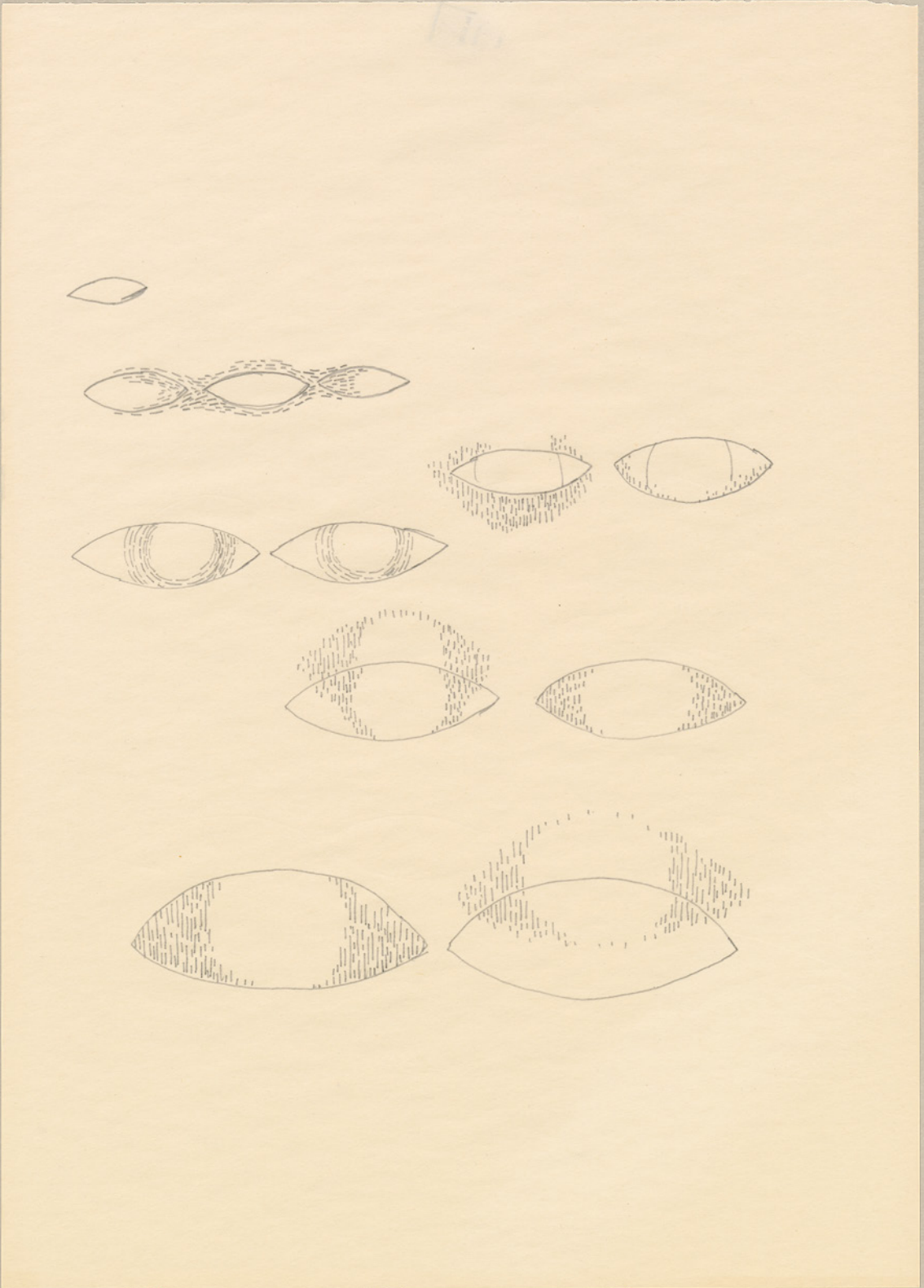
Biomatic Encounter, Eyes (With Thin Leaves), 2019

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 34.8 × 24.8 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Eyes (With Moringa Leaf), 2019

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 34.8 × 24.8 cm



Biomatic Encounter, Eyes (Dissolving/Assembling Group), 2019

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 34.8 × 24.8 cm

One of the reasons for my journey to Colombia was a long-standing interest in the global movement of natural resources. I visited Cerrejón, the largest open-pit coal mine on the planet, and the many kilometres-long trains passing through the drying farms in the surrounding La Guajira area en route to harbours where the coal is shipped to other continents. I wanted to witness the destruction caused by the globalised extraction economies that our society and lifestyles are built upon, and the manifestations of extraction industries at their most extreme scale – the intensifying land grabs, the social conflicts and destruction of cultures and livelihoods that follow, the silencing of human guardians of seeds, nature, and local communities.



One of seven Cerrejón open-pit coal mines, La Guajira, Colombia



Detail of the coal mine landscape on the previous page

SEEDS

I made some clay pots in a workshop in Bogotá to store the seeds I collected and received as gifts. I decorated the pots with what I thought of as biomatic eyes, a protector of the content.



Bowl (Biomatic Eyes), 2019

Fired clay and collected corn seeds, 9 × 21 × 21 cm

Some of the seeds I kept in the bowls came from the farm of a community leader I was in touch with in Bogotá, who is trying to save as many corn variations as he can on this piece of land. Embedded in each corn seed variation are hundreds, maybe thousands, of years of culture and cultivation, which has adapted the seed to local climates, soil types, insects, animals, nutrition, and cooking traditions. The more variation among locally

adapted seeds, the more resilience the community has against conditions that might challenge harvests. A community that saves seeds from its own harvest becomes self-sufficient and independent, which can be perceived as a threat to political and economic powers with vested interests in engineered and patented mass-produced seeds and corresponding pesticides. While I was in Colombia, the community leader I was in touch with received death threats and had to go into hiding; our contact ended there, but more importantly, his work on his land was interrupted. To risk one's life in the fight to protect nature is a fate many real-life guardians of nature share with the biomat character of the Norwegian TV series.



Plate (Biomimetic Eyes and Plant), 2019

Fired clay, 2 × 25 × 25 cm



Biomantic Encounter, Lockdown (Falling Leaves), 2020

Watercolour on paper, 29.8 × 21 cm



2000 Seed Capsules, 2015–ongoing [detail]

Floor piece made of seeds, clay, earth, sea concentrate, fermented comfrey, dimensions variable. Installation view from 'As Spaces Fold, Companions Meet', Oslo Kunstforening, Norway, 2016.

Between 2015 and 2018, I made several iterations of the floor-based work *2000 Seed Capsules*, which consists of two thousand small balls made of a mixture of seeds, soil, and different coloured clay. The balls were arranged into a pixelated pattern on the floor of exhibition spaces. For this work I collaborated with a plant sociologist to collect a combination of seeds with the potential to increase biodiversity in the surroundings of Oslo Kunstforening, where I first exhibited the piece. The seed balls were based on a recipe by Masanobu Fukuoka, a pioneer of regenerative agriculture who cultivated vegetation in deserts with the use of seed capsules composed of native seeds and fungus within a ball made of clay and soil. The balls are small packets of nutrition for the seeds, with the clay and soil protecting the seeds so they are able to settle in desert landscapes. I think of the knowledge and integrated practices of the seed savers involved and referred to in this project as biomatic.

I am fascinated by the coded nature and transforming capacity of seeds, how they are designed to travel and disperse, how they are saved and guarded, manipulated, copyrighted, or seen as invasive. I am interested in the role seeds play in regeneration and healing, as well as political and economic suppression, manipulation, and control.



2000 Seed Capsules, 2015–ongoing [detail]

Installation view from 'Future Knowledge', Modern Art Oxford, UK, 2018

The owner of the clay workshop in Bogotá showed me how to use two kinds of large native seeds to polish the clay when the surface is almost dry. The seeds are very large, hard, and smooth, and when they are used to rub the surface of the clay at the right moment, the clay becomes smooth and watertight. This method creates a soft shine and is an ancient way of sealing clay as an alternative to glazing. I later encountered these seeds in large quantities washed up on the beach on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, where I collected a few of them to take with me back to Norway for later use.

Back in Norway, I travelled to Lofoten on the northern coast for another artist residency. While waiting for a ferry in Bodø, I spent some time in a secondhand bookshop and happened across a booklet about ancient local traditional medicine. I was amused to encounter a description of the exact same kinds of large seeds I had used in the clay workshop. I learned that the seeds travel along the Gulf Stream from the Caribbean to the north of Norway, where people used to collect them for their medicinal capacities long before anybody knew where the seeds came from.



Found seeds from La Guajira, Colombia, and secondhand brochure, *Ottar – edisinplanter*, Issue 2, 1998, published by Museum of Tromsø, Norway

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