



THE HANDS THAT SHUT THE SUN

Emily Brontë's poem *To a Wreath of Snow*, from which this exhibition takes its title, casts the natural world as a *voiceless, soulless messenger*.¹ Landscape and flora exist as silent companions, unlike humans and animals, who cry out, act, and alter. Yet silence is not absence. Nature offers messages in its lessons, its medicines, its demand for contemplation. Human touch, by contrast, wavers between destruction, protection, and uneasy collaboration.

Nature and its dwellers are not property²

The protagonist wakes to a snowy morning, the countryside a *silvery form, so soft and fair*. Imagine a single snowflake, its intricacy invisible to the naked eye, vanishing on an eyelash, dissolving at the touch of a fingertip. In its fragility, a paradox: an endless wreath of snow, bound by numbers, becomes a quiet force, a message of coalition, solidarity and endurance.

The literary, essayistic, and poetic quotations gathered here act as invocations - a thread to follow, to break, to sew. To sow, scattering seeds, invoking the parable of the sower: You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. And in a post-apocalyptic text, a warning unheeded: a message of change, written over 30 years ago by Octavia E. Butler, set in recent years of shock and awe and apathy:

Consider: Whether you're a human being, an insect, a microbe, or a stone, this verse is true.

All that you touch,
You Change.

All that you Change,
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.³

1 Emily Brontë, *To a Wreath of Snow*, 1837, poetryfoundation.org/poems/161908/to-a-wreath-of-snow

2 Statement painted on canvas by Eline McGeorge, *to be part to be many - canvas 2*, 2024, water soluble oil paint and mushroom ink on canvas, 214 x 605 cm.

3 Octavia E. Butler, *The Parable of the Sower* (UK: Headline publishing, 1993/2019) 75.

There is deep observation in this exhibition akin to Pauline Oliveros' *Deep Listening: listening in every possible way, to everything it's possible to hear, no matter what you are doing. Such intense listening includes the sounds of daily life, of nature, or one's own thoughts, as well as musical sounds.*⁴

Eline McGeorge's work *to be part to be many* (2024) takes research from her residency near the open pit coal mining landscapes in Colombia and the adjacent sites of bird biodiversity to a large canvas. Made with water soluble oil paint and dye from mushrooms gathered by the artist - earth and image are bound together. Her research into succulent plants native to a diamond-mined Namib desert and the bird cliffs of Northern Norway and the now extinct *Lakrismjbeltblåvinge* butterfly of the Oslo fjord islands all seep into the work. It is at once a call to action and an object of reflection. When the camera met the gaze of the birds feeding on the moringa tree while filming during the residency, McGeorge observed: *Who is witnessing who in the presence of countless forms of sentience? Among all these knowledges of life inherited and shared, where are the borders between the material and consciousness?*⁵

A grey bird with a crest and a black mask.
Gilt edges the slim
tail feathers.
an eyedrop of arterial blood in flask

of gray water is the flashing red
under the wing.
A large wader, gimlet-eyed, under
the sun's gimlet eye,

spearing frogs in the cattail
marsh. The sun itself a larger bird,
its wings manufacturing
the solar wind

that devours, that is what can devour a person
floating in the vacuum

4 Pauline Oliveros, *Quantum Listening* (UK: 2010, Ignota 2022) 29.
5 Eline McGeorge, *crwa* (UK: Dent-De-Leone, 2024).

of perpetual space,
which is what there is and also is

itself a bird, a blackbird,
its black eye, black in black,
its sidewise look that makes you
look back.⁶

Belkis Ayón drew inspiration from the Abakuá, an all-male secret society brought to Cuba in the 19th century by enslaved Nigerians. A linocut torso bears their signatures; a veiled language, once inked into flesh, now pressed onto paper. The figure's hands form a typical pose of shame and bodily protection. Ayón collapses history into myth, threading love, devotion, and sacrifice through her work. In another linocut, a wave-like rainbow slices across a figure's neck, dissolving the line between human and non-human.

At the core of Ayón's practice is the myth of Princess Sikán, who, while drawing water from the river, unknowingly trapped the sacred fish Tanz, a reincarnated king, its voice a conduit of power forbidden to women. Fearing the power passed to her, the men decreed her sacrifice. In a third work, a colograph, we see the iconography of the fish and through the tears and severed head of Sikán's sacrifice; it seems as though the sacred voice is being transferred to the bowing members of the Abakuá in ritualistic ceremony.

The atmosphere surrounding you
reaches heights in which
it changes things
concerning you or near you.

And as well as things, words
impossible in poems:
for example, the word gold
and, until this poem, silk.

True, your person arouses
rather than inducing sleep;
nor is it a sedative, a word

derived from the word for silk.

And it's true that the surface
of your external person,
of your skin and of all
that gropes inside you,

has nothing of the pompous,
false, academic surface
— that surface designated
by the phrase 'like silk.'

But in you, somewhere,
perhaps outside of you,
perhaps in the mood
your presence excites,

there's something muscular,
animal, carnal, pantherish,
catlike — catlike in substance
or in a cat's way of being —

something animal, animalistic,
crude, cruel — a cruelty — which
beneath the worn-out word
persists in the thing silk.⁷

On rock and stone, geological time and queer bodies -
on presence, absence, loss, and desire. A new drawing
by Charlie Prodger captures a fissured rock that she
encountered while walking in New Mexico. It extends
Prodger's records of moving through landscapes, where
body and terrain blur.

On what terms can this encountered rock speak of the
body? Its broken resistance, split open, a point of entry
formed, a divided self exposed. What of the smaller part
that pulls towards the ground as the larger mass leans
towards it? A tethered longing. Behind the rock its
mountainous, all-seeing ancestors remain.

Moisture, temperature, erosion - forces patient and

7 João Cabral de Melo Neto, translated by Richard Zenith, 'The
Word Silk', 1988, theparisreview.org/poetry/2549/the-word-silk-joao-cabral-de-melo-neto

insistent - carve a finite crack. Queer intimacy is traced in these fractures, in the quiet undoing of form, in the fluid boundaries where self and world dissolve into one another. Prodger's *landscapes* are difficult to conceive of as just places of rest or repair, they are instead as alive, as worked, as part of human activity as the city. Their position as observer and active agent are not mutually exclusive... Prodger presents to us a landscape that is alive because it is peopled, because it is not empty, because it has had many years of human and non-human life making its mark on it. It is alive because there is life in it and on it.⁸

Because *drag* changes when spoken of in the past i.e. he was *dragged* or they *drug* him down the long road, the pale rock and brown. Down dust, a knocking path. And to *drag* has a begin point (though two are considered): begins when man is bound; begins also with one first tug.

So we take the word to our own uses and say:

it begins with his head on the ground with his hair loose

under shoulders and shirt with snaps, they're mother-of-pearl. Then begins a yank. and slide, begins his skin and scalp —

begins a break a tear, red to pink

to precious white; then begins what is

his skull, glisten of star

to bone.⁹

In 1966 Cecilia Vicuña began creating precarios (precarious), objects composed of found natural materials and debris, she writes: *I called these works 'Arte Precario', creating a new independent category, a non colonized name for them. The precarios soon evolved into collective rituals and oral performances based on dissonant sound and the shamanic voice. The fluid, multi-dimensional quality of these works allowed them to exist in many media and languages at once. Created in and for the moment, they reflect ancient spiritual technologies - a knowledge of the power of individual and communal intention to heal us and the earth... Precarious means prayer, uncertain, exposed to hazards, insecure. Prayer is change, the dangerous instant of transmutation.*¹⁰

8 Seán Elder, 'Beating', *DOWSER*, Issue 5 (Glasgow, Scotland: Transit Arts, 2021)32.

9 Layli Long Soldier, 'Ñe Sápá, Two' 2017, poets.org/poem/he-sapa-two

10 ceciliavicuna.com

Revolutionary
violence is a nail
hammered
on a
banana leaf.
A rough
movement
to capture
the delicate,
an haiku
or a leap
of Tai chi¹¹

Transmutation, mutation, mutant.

The word mutant first emerged in the early 1900s. The Oxford English Dictionary lists five definitions, one marked as derogatory: a person or thing cast as deformed, grotesque, or unnatural, a deviation from the sanctioned order of things. A relic, perhaps, of the Victorian appetite for the monstrous, the 'freak' figures of gothic fiction. That same language resurfaces in the present, sharpened into a weapon, evidenced in the vilification of trans bodies, in the coercive correction of intersex infants - where deviation is not just named but erased.

Lucy Beech's film *Flush* (2023) tells us of early 20th century research into Freemartin cows, and how this informed human gender studies. This research, on the back of centuries of Western colonialism which, amongst the violent destruction of land and peoples, refuted indigenous third gender understanding. The Freemartin is an infertile female calf born with a twin male calf which demonstrates masculinised traits having absorbed his hormones through a shared bloodstream in utero. It is not a mutant but a biological phenomenon, an anomaly. It cannot breed, rendering it useless to the economic productivity of the farmer. And so it echoes gender norms; if our bodies don't conform, are infertile, or don't behave or respond to preconditioned expectations, if we cannot contribute to what Judith Butler calls *the*

11 Cecilia Vicuña, 31 July 1973, poem reproduced in *Saborami*, expanded facsimile edition, Cecilia Vicuña, Amy Tobin and Luke Roberts (eds.) (UK: Book Works, 2004).

*production and maintenance of legible humanity*¹², what then? Long has the scientific and medical intervention between animals and humans gone hand in hand. In the film, the placenta, that life giving force, becomes a *diagnostic tool*. The Freemartin cow replaces the gomer bull, a vasectomised bull used to identify cows in heat a *use for the useless*, marking cows with the Freemartin's desire so that they can be artificially inseminated. The use of human pregnancy hormones found in urine is *turned to gold* to support technological reproduction, assisting the cow's fertility. We see footage of waste dispersal, a dog licking spilt milk. There will be no waste in this relationship between productivity and normativity, no underperforming body.

In an essay *Between Waste and Creativity*, Elsa Richardson describes confusing Beech's film title *Flush* with a reference to Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1933), a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel. Despite Richardson's intention to move away from this misunderstanding, Woolf's aim to fully and completely understand the world through the senses of the dog keeps drawing the writer back to comparisons between the two.¹³

But Flush wandered off into the streets of Florence to enjoy the rapture of smell. He threaded his path through main streets and back streets, through squares and alleys, by smell. He nosed his way from smell to smell; the rough, the smooth, the dark, the golden. He went in and out, up and down, where they beat brass, where they bake bread, where the women sit combing their hair, where the bird-cages are piled high on the causeway, where the wine spills itself in dark red stains on the pavement, where leather smells and harness and garlic, where cloth is beaten, where vine leaves tremble, where men sit and drink and spit and dice – he ran in and out, always with his nose to the ground, drinking in the essence; or with his nose in the air vibrating with the aroma. He slept in this hot patch of sun – how sun made the stone reek! he sought that tunnel of shade – how acid shade made the stone smell! He devoured whole bunches of ripe grapes largely because of their purple smell; he chewed and spat out whatever tough relic of goat or macaroni the Italian housewife had thrown from the balcony – goat and macaroni were raucous smells, crimson smells. He followed the swooning sweetness of incense into the violet intricacies of dark cathedrals; and, sniffing, tried to lap the gold on the window- stained tomb. Nor was his sense of touch much less acute. He

12 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (UK: Routledge, 2004)11.

13 Elsa Richardson, 'Between Waste and Creativity', June 2023, lucybeech.com/between-waste-and-creativity

knew Florence in its marmoreal smoothness and in its gritty and cobbled roughness. Hoary folds of drapery, smooth fingers and feet of stone received the lick of his tongue, the quiver of his shivering snout. Upon the infinitely sensitive pads of his feet he took the clear stamp of proud Latin inscriptions. In short, he knew Florence as no human being has ever known it; as Ruskin never knew it or George Eliot either. Not a single one of his myriad sensations ever submitted itself to the deformity of words.¹⁴

Knut Henrik Henriksen's *Sad Flowers* (2025) are plaster sculptures which allude to the different emotional states of non-human lifeforms. The pathetic fallacy and apparent fragility of the works appeals to our empathy, a gentle invitation to look and hear deeply, to understand.

In her lecture *Hesitation* Anne Carson describes what the German poet Rilke called *einsehen* or in-seeing. *Can you imagine with me how glorious it is to in-see a dog... What I mean is let yourself precisely into the dog's centre, the point from which it begins to be a dog.*¹⁵ There is often an innate desire in humans, to get to the centre of a being, a human, animal or plant, to truly understand our purpose, our reasoning, our actions. Humans are also compelled to *fix* whether through the justice system or therapy or medicine. A broken leg might be mended with the Plaster of Paris of these sculptures, a broken heart with flowers. It is the invisible *broken* that Henriksen's flowers attend to. The composition of the flowers is so delicate, the weight so finely held, that they might snap at any moment, yet they hold on. In her book *Living a Feminist Life* Sara Ahmed writes about the *feminist snap*, or what might be called 'losing it', that moment of crisis when we reach breaking point, a crisis that poses a threat or an opening, a new way forward, and how we can think affirmatively about this.

Can we redescribe the world from the twig's point of view, that is, from the point of view of those who are under pressure?...If the twig was a stronger twig, if the twig was more resilient, it would take more pressure before it snapped. We can see how resilience is a technology of will, or even functions as a command: be willing to bear more, be stronger so you can bear more.

14 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, 1933, theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1933/10/a-cocker-recaptures-his-youth-flush-a-biography-iv/650719/

15 Anne Carson, *HIK: HESITATION*, 2024 vigdiscentre.hi.is/sites/vigdiscentre.hi.is/files/2024-06/Anne%20Carson%20Hesitation%20%28Hik%29%20GJG%20lecture%20series.pdf

We can understand too how resilience becomes a deeply conservative technique, one especially well suited to governance: you encourage bodies to strengthen so they will not succumb to pressure; so they can keep taking it, so they can take more of it. Resilience is the requirement to take more pressure; such that the pressure can be gradually increased...When you don't take it, when you can't take any more of it, what happens? The moment of not taking it is so often understood as losing it. When a snap is registered as the origin of violence, the one who snaps is deemed violent. She snaps....her snap is not the starting point.¹⁶

In cognitive behavioural therapy, the vicious flower model is a therapeutic map of entanglement: a way to see, and then sever, what causes you suffering. At its centre is a core belief or key cognition, the quiet engine of repetition. Around it, petals unfurl, each one a behavior that feeds the centre, arrows looping outward and curling back in. This flower brings clarity, a diagram of how pain perpetuates itself, how thought and action entwine. To trace its shape is to bring the pattern to light. To name it is to loosen its hold. From that unraveling, there is the possibility of change.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a farther shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.¹⁷

The horses Laura Ní Fhlaibhín collaborated with: Jack, Bob, Síofra, Allanah and Séan, work in an equestrian therapy centre, attending care homes and working alongside humans with a range of emotional and behavioural needs. The artist's offering of a rock of salt lick, which replaces lost minerals in the horse and provides a source of comfort is a reciprocal act, a form of gratitude and acknowledgement of the horse's silent companionship and unconditional support. This gesture manifests as a sculpture held by a wooden ash dowel. In ancient Ireland the ash tree was considered a protector; often found near sacred water and wells, ash was thought to protect the water and land. In Ní Fhlaibhín's work a lineage of

16 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, US:Duke University Press, 2017) 189, Durham.

17 Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy* (UK: Faber, 1990).

protection continues: animal to human, human to animal, animal to mineral, mineral to wood.

Places do not heal us; they do not take the suffering we have known and bury it in their bellies. Places do not gather the broken bits of us up and stitch them back together. Places do not make the light shine on crow-black nights. Places do not take our sorrow; they do not unearth the words buried under frozen bog-land; they do not call the birds back when they have been long gone from our sky.

Places do not heal us.

Places only hold us; they only let us in.

Places only hold us close enough that we can finally see ourselves reflected back.¹⁸

In her early work, Altoon Sultan developed a practice depicting expansive agricultural landscapes, later shifting the perspective to the landscape's related machinery and industry, drawing attention to the details of hydraulics, axes, and curves. The machines, isolated in close frames, suggest a larger system. We are made to consider their function, their scale, and their place within the land and its cycles.

Arms (2023) by Sultan is a detail of an Ag-Bagger, which processes corn into silage for cows. There is something alive in the way the machine interacts with the land it alters, a quiet violence in the way it cuts into the earth and packs the harvest away, leaving nothing behind but the imprint of a system that feeds and consumes. Painted in egg tempera on calfskin parchment, the Ag-Bagger is depicted on the skin of the animal it feeds: a mechanism within a network that both sustains and takes.

The red signs in the ancient woodland, near the ruins, say TREE CUTTING. As you proceed along the path, you can hear timber splitting, the dog-pant of handsaws grinding back and forth. The leaf-sodden mud is specked with wood dust. Soon, this becomes a thickened, beer-head scum, turning the earth the colour of snow and animal urine. And like snow, the dust seems to deaden all sound. Your footprints are the only tracks to pattern it. There are piles of branches, like tangled coat hangers, on either side of the path. There are neat stacks of freshly cut logs, with perfectly flat, perfectly white moon-faces.

18 Kerri Ni Dochartaigh, *Thin Places* (UK: Canongate Books 2021/22) 228.

You come to a clearing. Handsaws, mallets, and work gloves are scattered on the ground. Helmets, with safety goggles snapped onto the rims, lie here and there, as though they have been rolled off their respective heads without care or reason. The scent of woodsmoke hangs in the air. But there's no fire. Everything is very still. Then, up ahead, the evergreen tree-line bends backwards in a sudden wall of wind. Clouds flare across the domed sky, draining the little light that was left of the day. You have forgotten what you came here for. The way back is unclear.¹⁹

Aquariums are small, self-contained worlds. Decorative objects, meant to frame fish, sit unused, casting a stillness over the space. Without their usual inhabitants, plastic life (plants, rocks, colourful sand) takes centre stage, revealing the tension between non-human life and the boundaries we impose on it. In their absence, the fake becomes the reality—an unsettling replacement.

Trevor Yeung's aquariums function as metaphors for human attempts to care for and control nature. We retain lifeforms that are beautiful, but always separate from the world they belong to, contained in a space they cannot escape. Behind the glass, mushrooms glow faintly, their light cold and artificial. The empty space that could have held life serves as a reminder of the distance between nature's raw existence and our need to shape it into something manageable, something we can hold in place.

The fish, confined to their tanks, swim in tight, repetitive circles, their movements graceful but ultimately futile. The tank becomes their world, one that they cannot leave, no matter how much they struggle against its limits. Their grace is reduced to mechanical repetition and reproduction, their energy turned into something static and controlled. Captured in Yeung's pigment drawings *Dissolve into Nothing* (2022), dead fish are reduced to silhouettes floating in milky residue. They are objects of attention, yes, but also objects of limitation. They are watched but never allowed to exist beyond the boundaries we set, separated from earth's rhythms and flows.

Up the coast a few miles north, in a lava reef under the cliffs, there are a lot of rock pools. You can visit them when the tide is out. Each pool is separate and different, and you can, if you are fanciful, give them names – such as

19 Ralf Webb, *Rotten Days in Late Summer* (UK: Penguin, 2021).

George, Charlotte, Kenny, Mrs Strunk. Just as George and the others are thought of, for convenience, as individual entities, so you may think of a rock pool as an entity; though, of course, it is not. The waters of its consciousness – so to speak – are swarming with hunted anxieties, grim-jawed greeds, dartingly vivid intuitions, old crusty-shelled rock-gripping obstinacies, deep-down sparkling undiscovered secrets, ominous protean organisms motioning mysteriously, perhaps warningly, toward the surface light. How can such a variety of creatures coexist at all? Because they have to. The rocks of the pool hold their world together. And, throughout the day of the ebb tide, they know no other. But that long day ends at last; yields to the night-time of the flood.²⁰

Kim Lim's work is informed by her lifelong interest and observations in nature and frequent travels in the East and West. Rarely seen photography in her archive reveals the particular attention she gave to the places where the effects of nature were visible – the long throw of sunlight through an architectural archway, the bough of a tree, or the wooden rafters of an ancient roof. Her sculptures and prints consistently return to nature's cadence through patterns and texture. The carving of stone is a physical, rhythmic act, the resulting linear forms retain a natural openness and lightness of touch. Her reflective approach is also seen in her printmaking, where the fluidity of the natural world takes on another material, the limestone lithographic stone working in tandem with the Portland stone of her sculptures.

The woods are the organ
Of the wind. The wind puts its hand

over the forest's mouth.
Trees struggle for breath, then faint.

It is a wood — it doesn't speak
Except to itself. Its eyes are knots in bark

And it is April, and it's moving.
I can hear the soft, transmuted

aches of growing and easing back
to form, the forest creaking awake

²⁰ Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (UK: Vintage Classics, 1964/2010) 150.

around me. Then nothing but mutterings —
the sun bending its neck to look through trees,

Birds building houses from the open ribs
Of bushes. My quick movements startle

the sleeping leaves. When I turn, things speak...
Now the wood swallows me into its heart,

pushing weather rings behind bark
in its old, megalith slowness. I hold still,

hearing nothing but the crackle
of my own ears opening.

It starts to rain. It rains. The still day
whispers with the feedback of dead leaves

like dust translating on the air's vinyl.
Hold your ear

to the ground: you can hear
the voices caught in the earth chattering,

and the rain typing on puddles
and the wind wiping them clean.²¹

A partnership between a fungus and an alga, lichen is able to grow on rocks, tree trunks, leather, and the shells of living animals. It forms layers over other organisms, slowly building itself upon them. Lichen is often the first to colonise bare rocks, mountains, and cliffs. It corrodes the rock, accumulating minerals and organic matter. Over time, mosses and grasses follow, using the soil that lichen has created. Lichen also offers protection to birds, who use it to camouflage their nests. Its growth is a slow act of interdependence, one organism supporting another, creating a living network where each part relies on the other to survive. Lichen is a marker of clean air. Sensitive to pollution, it thrives only in environments that remain undisturbed by excessive human intervention. Its presence signals

21 Seán Hewitt, 'I sit and eavesdrop the trees', *Tongues of Fire* (UK: Jonathan Cape, 2020) 40-41.

purity, yet it can also survive in harsh, rocky, or barren landscapes where other life forms struggle. Each species of lichen is unique, a small world in itself, constantly evolving in its layered growth. But Lucy Mercer's hand-painted poems remove lichen from this living context, translating it onto glass, a medium that, like lichen, is both fragile and unyielding. Each poem begins with the Latin name of a specific species, capturing its essence without depicting it directly. The transparency of the glass allows the poems to merge with various surfaces and textures, becoming porous and responsive to light and shadow. In this way, Mercer's poems embody lichen's fragility and interconnectedness, both dynamic and delicate.

Usnea articulata

afterword
without
end

afterword
without
end²²

The line the *hands that shut the sun* imagines a hand that blocks the light from nature's brow. The works in this exhibition consider the human hand in nature in many instances and propositions, sometimes extractive and hopeless, other times joyful and full of potential, poetry and resistance.

In 1977, Audre Lorde wrote *poetry is not a luxury* describing it as a vital necessity of our existence. For her, *poetry forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.*²³

22 Usnea articulata, text from glass poem by Lucy Mercer, 2025.
23 Audre Lorde, 'Poetry is not a Luxury', *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (UK: Silver Press, 1977/2017) 8.

The Hands that Shut the Sun

Belkis Ayón, Lucy Beech, Knut Henrik Henriksen, Kim Lim,
Eline McGeorge, Laura Ní Fhlaibhín, Charlie Prodger,
Altoon Sultan, Cecilia Vicuña, Trevor Yeung

with glass poems by Lucy Mercer

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