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The Specter of Nature

by

Stephanie Anne Clark

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
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The Specter of Nature

by

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B.A. Visual Arts, Rice University, 2005

M.F.A., Imaging Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2011

Abstract

The Specter of Nature is a photographic series that examines the tenuous boundaries between culture and Nature. Through this thesis, I address how, within culture, Nature is defined, distorted, fantasized and then realized through various forms of representation. To this end, Nature historically serves as a backdrop in culturally constructed fantasies and storytelling, as well as historically playing a role in the development of a female identity. My project, *The Specter of Nature*, examines these concerns through staged photographs of settings created from fabrics and cutouts of decorative papers.

By cutting along the patterns embedded in materials such as wrapping papers, wallpapers, scrapbooking papers, and costume fabrics, then hanging the pieces in the studio and photographing them, I shift between two spaces; thus paralleling the shift between the real and unreal, between the conscious and unconscious. By constructing settings that merge fantasy and reality, I attempt to reconcile the complexity of a recognized history with a realized desire.

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I. Background

As an artist, I am always searching for relationships through materials and forms that represent the connections humankind has with the internal world and the external world, spaces that defy boundaries and our expectations. My project, titled *The Specter of Nature*, examines these concerns through staged photographs of settings created from cutouts of decorative materials. By constructing settings that merge fantasy and reality, I attempt to reconcile the complexity of a recognized history with a realized desire.

Using chosen materials such as wrapping papers, wallpapers, scrapbooking papers and costume fabrics, I arranged subtle and sensitive settings that draw from visual references and history. Studying theater, storytelling and illustration, I designed and photographed backdrops; thereby creating illustrative spaces that suggest witnessing and entering another place and time through storytelling and fantasy.

While decorative design is found throughout any and all cultures, the decorative forms themselves are far from timeless. To the contrary, the decorative patterns found inscribed on wallpapers, fabrics, wrapping and scrap-booking papers are inherently contemporary, designed and manufactured in factories that exist today. The materials chosen for this project are marketed to consumers. In many ways, these materials can reference ‘another time’ through the use of stylistic forms found within previous eras and the use of colors associated with an artistic period. While many of these patterns can ‘look back,’ one must be aware that these craft materials exist with an ambiguous

relationship to the past and present; as is the case with much design that is not explicitly *Modern*.

For instance, in my photographs *Untitled (a.k.a. Rococo in White)* (fig. 1) and *Untitled (a.k.a. Rococo in Red)* (fig. 2), wallpaper was chosen that explicitly referenced the colors and shades of the Rococo era, with the texture of this specific paper mimicking satins and silks. Rococo itself was a style not only of décor, but inspired by the theater of culture. I begin with these photographs as these represent the beginning of the project *The Specter of Nature*, and are directly addressing the issue of a historical era becoming transcribed onto contemporary consumer materials. Rodolphe el-Khoury discusses these components in his introduction to *The Little House: An Architectural Seduction*; called an architectural novella, *The Little House* sensually describes an encounter at a *petite maison*.² Containing the finest décor in taste and form, this house is designed to bring the outside in, creating a domestic wilderness designed to ensnare a female love interest.³ Within the introduction to this novella, el-Khoury makes a statement about Rococo design, “The Theatrical inspiration is clear and is also evident in the dramatic use of lighting and in the machinery of spectacle and illusion...”⁴ It is from this style and era that I will depart in ascribing the decorative space to that of the female body and how that played a role in the development of my imagery. As I discuss the results of my process and photographic imagery, I will conclude that this notion of simply reserving the

² Jean-François de Bastide, ed. *The Little House : An Architectural Seduction*, vol. 1st ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).

³ According to Anthony Vidler, “The term *petite maison* refers to a specific building type that dates from the beginning of the Régence... which remained a staple fixture in eighteenth-century libertine fiction... used as secluded quarters for clandestine encounters.” *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

decorative to that of a domestic nature, though historically significant, is perhaps somewhat antiquated based on the attitudes and responses from audience members who viewed the photographs in the gallery setting.

My imagery will move from what began as a lightness and reflection on past histories, mimicking traditional modes of painting and color as seen in the aforementioned photographs, and into imagery that reflects a more introspective approach to representation, one that merges what is known with what is unknown. In the beginning there was light, but in my final pieces shadows haunt the imagery, making a statement about the ambiguous nature of both the photograph and the desire to represent and reflect on the world outside.



Fig. 1. *Untitled (a.k.a. Rococo in White)*. 2008. Digital inkjet print. 27.5x40in.

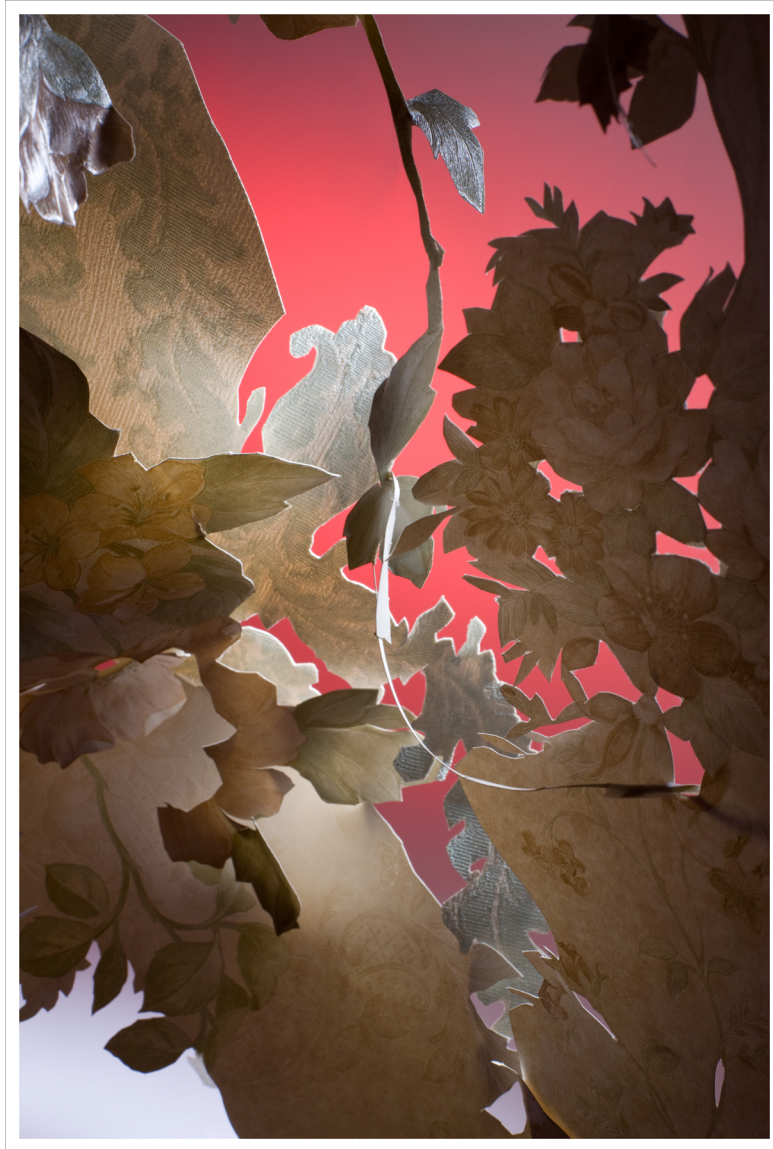


Fig. 2. *Untitled (a.k.a. Rococo in Red)* 2008. Digital inkjet print. 27.5x40in.

II. Process

My artistic process began with a collection of papers and fabrics. Overwhelmingly my material resources came from fabrics and papers found in craft stores. Focusing on obtaining pieces or rolls of paper that contained floral patterns and arabesque designs, I followed my intuition and attempted to create a diverse collection in order to better understand the similarities and differences in the disparate patterns reflected on this source material. Some of the papers came with cheap flocking that described the floral patterns, while other fine sheets of wrapping paper contained the details of gold accents and referenced botanical prints of the 19th century. My intention was to build an understanding of how and why these forms, aesthetically appropriated from Nature, are relevant today. Even in today's modern world, the desire to re-visit Nature seems insatiable, and yet it holds little if any attention within the contemporary discourse on aesthetics.

The collection of source material was just a step in the process, one that involved observing consumer made materials, and accumulating those that caught my fancy. With source material selected, I began to cut out the patterns that were presented on the papers; the fabrics would have to wait for another step in the process, the backdrop. The cutting of the patterns allowed me to transform the 2-dimensional surface of the papers into an object that, with additional lighting, could appear 3-dimensional. It was a choice that would allow me to address the issue of representation and what it means to move between spaces and planes, or planes into spaces.

In C.G. Jung and the Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious Robin Robertson asks a poignant question when discussing Carl Jung's research on the subject of psychology and dreams. "What is the relationship between the world inside, and the world outside man?" "If the mind and the world are separate... How can we ever find a bridge back to the world?"⁵ This question is one that not only addresses psychology, but one which haunts representation, and it is this question that is continually addressed within the photographs of *The Specter of Nature*. How has Nature (or the world outside) come to be represented through materials? What role does it (Nature) play, and in what capacity do designs and patterns that borrow from Nature reflect humankind's need to mark a connection between these two realms? My solution of playing with various materials has allowed me, throughout my process, to address these questions. In addition, the photographs from *The Specter of Nature* investigate image-making's role in bridging notions of tactile reality with fantasy through a complex creative process that moves between media and intent, between clarity and confusion.

By cutting along the patterns embedded in the papers, hanging the pieces in the studio, and photographing them, I shift between two spaces, paralleling the shift between the real and unreal, between the conscious and unconscious. Interacting with the materials this way offers a sensual experience, which I as a creator desire. I choose to cut my forms along the given patterns, thus serving as a metaphor for conformity, creating a piece that at once results in an object that reflects the original pattern, but through the imperfect process of cutting, creates a pattern that is changed from the design. Patterns offer another role as well; making sense of an ever-complex world that cannot be easily

⁵ Robin Robertson, *C.G. Jung and the Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, American university studies Series VIII, Psychology (New York: P. Lang, 1987)., 8.

contained or controlled. When considering pattern in this way, it additionally offers a sense of comfort. It is also through this notion of comfort, that storytelling seems to emerge. With this in mind, the patterns found on the materials serve as a template, providing the shapes that will later be used to create my photographic space.

Cutting these papers was both restrictive and freeing. Restrictive in that it limited the type of mark-making that I was able to produce, but in another way this limitation offered a transformative quality to the material by allowing the pattern move from an embedded surface into a 3-dimensional form, sometimes with unexpected results as I could not stay inside the lines. I accepted this, and this allowed me to feel free to explore a variety of forms and characters with the opportunity of serendipitous intervention.

Cutting along the lines and navigating through the various floral patterns on the papers, I found myself almost unconsciously asking these general questions. Where are the lines? Am I inside or am I outside the lines? Who made these lines? Why is this (cutting/creating) important? And indeed, I find myself asking these questions still today. However, I found that these questions, so simple and obvious, are questions of an existential quality that our post-modern world finds significant even today. While my humble marks were perhaps not directly indicating or indicting particular social structures, these small actions reflect on much broader issues. The mere act of cutting seemed to bring together a universal understanding that representation is always caught on the threshold of the inside and outside based solely on the reliance of the artist's body.

During this process of exploring patterns, I would cut and tear into the decorated papers, hanging the resulting pieces in my studio with strings and tape to construct a new space, displacing the original function of each material. My work plays with these

confusions that exist. I create another world saturated with representations, and through these varying forms there is a reflection onto the Natural world that is both distorted and dystopic. Because of the stylized Natural forms found in the originating pattern, such as tendrils and flora, echoes of a utopia still find their way into the imagery. I chose decorative materials as evidence of the various ways mankind views Nature as form, and how Nature as form is aesthetically appropriated.

Because I am interested in the transitions that take place between the varying media and forms, two-dimensional and three-dimensional, printed-paper and the photograph, interiors and exteriors, I chose to light my work in a way that highlighted that moment of change, and effectively highlighting the issue of the threshold. Choosing backlighting for the majority of my pieces did this.

By backlighting the cutouts of paper, the imagery could now have a new visual dimension. By allowing the cutouts to become silhouettes or shadows within the picture frame, the imagery could begin to grapple with an issue that the photograph continues to examine, that of clarity. Not only did the backlighting offer an opportunity to visually change characteristics of the cutouts, it commented on a threshold found in nature, that of the sunrise and sunset, where light and dark meet. This solution allowed the cutouts to appear as 'more than' the simple two-dimensions that they began as. By applying the lighting to layers of hung paper, the distant viewer would be unable to clarify what sort of image was presented within the photograph, but upon closer inspection would discover the details and merging of materials in the photographic plane and the emerging of details presented from the patterns embedded within those papers.

Not only did the papers become transformed, but the audience's experience did as well. Adding another element to the production of these pieces, I chose to hang costume fabrics as the backdrop to several of my pieces, allowing the colors of the fabric to project onto the scene and adding another dimension of fantasy to the photographic form. The costume fabrics that served as the backdrops were overly saturated in color and thus inserted an element of superficiality to the subjects of the photographs. In addition, these costume fabrics were often marketed for producing children's costumes, and thus these colors are those that are often associated with childhood fantasies in contemporary culture.

By lighting my work in such a way as will offer both light and shadow, I am again attempting to create a new space, one that draws attention to the recognizable (this can be considered the 'real' or the conscious) and the unrecognizable (unconscious, unknown, unrecognized). The shadow offers many connections to my experiences both as a child and as an artist investigating mimicry within representation. Memories from my childhood include watching shadows dance on the walls of my bedroom during the night; my mind would create movements and figures that didn't actually exist. Relative to *The Specter of Nature*, the concept of shadows can symbolize the shadow of history, and the sometimes-disorienting experience of our own consciousness.

III. Narrative

In my imagery, the constructed photographic image immediately implies that the use of the frame both excludes and includes particular elements involved in the artistic process. During the production of images for *The Specter of Nature*, I created a space where source materials were integrated, though not seamlessly. Each finished photograph contains a limited view of the original materials, and excludes the studio space surrounding the installation, offering the illusion of expansive space. Two bodies of work by Abelardo Morell inspired me. First, his *Alice in Wonderland* series, where he used paper illustrations from the original text to create photographic illustrations of the story by removing the imagery from the book and placing it into the three-dimensional world.⁶ In Morell's *Theater* series he examines the backstage of theaters and Opera houses, depicting a surreal world. In particular, his imagery of The Metropolitan Opera scenery inspired what would become my approach for arranging my cutouts. By first hanging my cut papers and then arranging the pieces in layers, my studio arrangements reference theater maquettes, creating the illusion of depth and scale. Visually my photographs began to approach notions of magic, within storytelling and within the studio space itself, by depicting a space that seemed to defy gravity and ignore the studio setting.

Introducing this mode of installation that reflects theater, and then introducing lighting to the scene adds another complementary element that creates a visual association to a stage and introduces the concepts of backdrops and scenery, thereby

⁶ Abelardo Morell, and Richard B. Woodward, *Abelardo Morell* (London ; New York: Phaidon, 2005).

implying a narrative. By framing and setting the stage for a narrative, I altogether avoid specific interpretation and play with the audience's perception through the act of reproduction. Through silhouettes, lighting and sensitivity to materials I construct scenes highlighting the artificiality of forms from Nature, suggesting the historical and contemporary concepts that underlay the idealization of Nature. By combining these different materials into the same space I force the comparison and merging of disparate designs and materials into scenes that reference the complicated relationship visual culture has with Nature. As will be discussed in the following chapter, this relationship has been examined through a variety of forms.

I eventually adopted the strategy of implying a narrative voice: merging a notion of storytelling within the imagery. In my photograph *Untitled (a.k.a. Children)* (fig. 3) I chose to cut out silhouettes of children from illustrations, repurposing these figures into poses that suggest a mystery beyond the frame. These silhouettes offer a familiar form for my audience to enter the image through. This again is an attempt to merge a familiar imagery with a new form that offers a statement on constructing familiar narratives, and comment on the potential of childhood and constructed desires, and an expression of those unconscious desires that follow into adulthood. Nature is presented here as a mysterious space where the potential for the unexpected and mysteries can still be found. As the figures in my photograph stretch and view something that the audience cannot, I am attempting to pique the curiosity and hence the desire to enter the 'space' of the photograph, however impenetrable it is. Other figures, such as the fairies seen in *Untitled (a.k.a. Fairies)* (fig. 4) were figures found in pages designed for scrapbooks, a place where our most precious objects are found: photographs. The fairy itself is a nod at the

Cottingley Fairies controversy in which those believers and non-believers publicly feuded over the truth of the photograph, and in turn the spirit of believing in that which is seen or unseen.⁷

⁷ Geoffrey Crawley, "That astonishing affair of the Cottingley fairies," *British Journal of Photography* 129(December 1982).



Fig. 3. *Untitled (a.k.a. Children)*. 2010. Digital inkjet print. 30x40in.

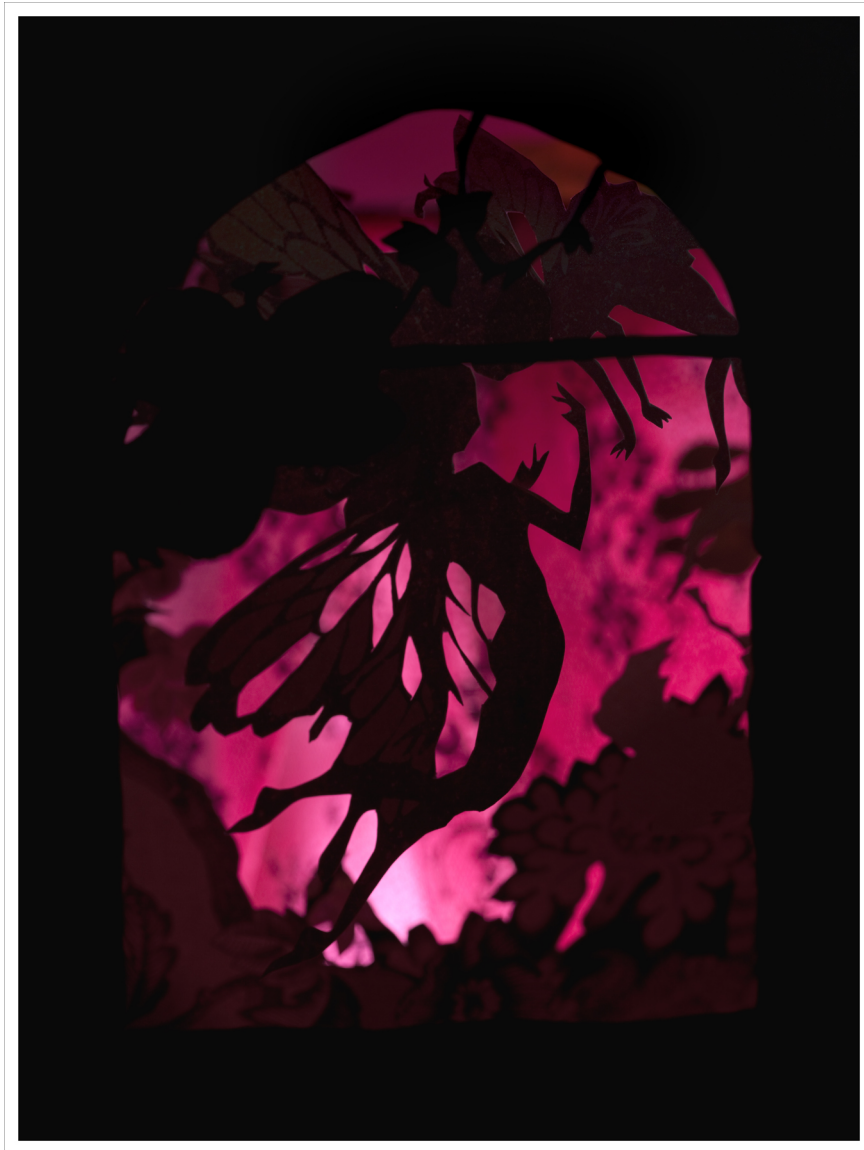


Fig. 4. *Untitled (a.k.a. Fairies)*. 2010. Digital inkjet print. 30x40in.

III. Influences

Drawing from a variety of artists that examine the subject of the body and Nature, I searched for representations of Nature in a variety of forms, and its historical relationship to the body; a history that is deeply embedded within visual culture, mythologies, and religions. I came to the understanding that even in the absence of a body Nature, as a concept, is one that relies on the assumed existence of a human figure. The term landscape itself requires a viewer and an assumption of boundaries. It fits into already held subjective and ideological notions, that more often than not, pre-determine our relationship within it. In every way the idea of landscape is always present, although it changes according to the convenience of the viewer and fits into their expectations of space. Through my observations within classic story telling, Nature and the landscape are exploited as anthropomorphized spaces of passions and chaos; through my imagery and process I am reflecting on the very fabric of the landscape, the observer, and the need to describe Nature through containment. It is a space often wrought with projections of relationships, both assumed and observed.

In regards to the use of decorative materials, from contemporary visual art to literature of the Enlightenment, artists have chosen to explore this subject to varying degrees and through a variety of mediums. For instance, Charlotte Perkins Gilman chose to describe domestic wallpaper in her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” describing the dark pattern of the paper as a living form growing and twisting within the protagonist’s mind. The pattern itself serving as a symbol of a woman’s descent into madness brought

about by the confinement of women, as was the social norms of her time, and the author's reflection on a personal experience of her own⁸. While Gilman's story has become a 'must read' within feminist circles, in actuality, decorative forms can be found throughout history and within all cultures, and not all are in reference to the woman and confinement. However it again is important to note that the sordid history of women and the decorative is one that is difficult to displace.

While exploring fairy tales, Jack Zipes explains in his article *Breaking the Magic Spell: Politics and the Fairy Tale* that the traditional fairy tale "was at first revolutionary and progressive," reflecting on "real socio-political issues and conflicts."⁹ Zipes explains that the magic presented in these tales was given to level the playing field between the aristocracy and peasantry, where justice was served equally to those who deserved it. Today's magic within fairy tales no longer symbolizes an equalizer, but a purifier resembling the good and the evil of the characters it surrounds. The contemporary norm of a *magical* Nature found in such stories, and its purifying role, not only in storytelling, but also in the visual arts, has not been lost to some artists. Angela Carter's contemporary take on the fairy tale *Bluebeard* exemplifies contemporary culture's use of Nature as a symbol of purity and hope within narratives. Here an excerpt depicts the surroundings of a castle that hides a dark secret, and demonstrates Nature as a framing device of a purifying form:

And, ah! his castle. The faery solitude of the place; with its turrets of misty blue, its courtyard, its spiked gate, his castle that lay on the very bosom of the sea with seabirds mewing about its attics, the casements opening on to the green and

⁸ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Thomas L. Erskine, and Connie L. Richards, *The yellow wallpaper*, Women writers (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

⁹ Jack Zipes, "Breaking the Magic Spell: Politics and the Fairy Tale " *New German Critique* No. 6, no. Autumn, 1975 (1975)., 131.

purple, evanescent departures of the ocean, cut off by the tide from land for half a day ... that castle, at home neither on the land nor on the water, a mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves, with the melancholy of a mermaid who perches on her rock and waits, endlessly, for a lover who had drowned far away, long ago. That lovely, sad, sea-siren of a place! (Carter 9-10)¹⁰

In Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, the female protagonist looks forward to her new home; the castle of the man she has recently married. Notions of nature surround her dreams; she imagines seabirds, the ocean, the earth and the waves, the girl fantasizes of becoming 'Queen of the Sea'. Carter's writing ingeniously manages to highlight the various roles representation has played into the notion of woman, as an innocent ideal and object. Nature here serves as a way of structuring and framing those ideals, offering the façade of innocence to the castle, which hides bloody secrets.

Continuing with Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, the castle contains paintings by the artists Watteau, Fragonard (fig. 3), Gauguin (fig. 4) and Ensor: artists notorious for their depiction of women within Nature.¹¹ Gauguin in particular is well known for his relationships with women, and faces a conflicting reception from those who are aware of his transgressions while an artist. These Masters' works offer visual evidence of the historical relationship the female body has with Nature within representation. As the subject of these paintings, the female is an object to behold and nothing more. With regard to the bodies that the female character finds within the bloody chamber, Carter describes the victims as "exquisite corpses," a play on words relating to the surrealist figures of the same name that were also sexualized and fractured; Carter's

¹⁰ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (NY; London: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1993, c1979), 9-10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

brilliant comment on the contentious relationship that exists between Woman and the Arts. These layers of visual history create an identity that cannot be easily removed from the representation of the female, because of the dense application of arabesques and floral imagery placed within my photographs for *The Specter of Nature*; the concept of the female is present even in the absence of the figure.

While investigating the issues of storytelling within mythologies, Jean Shinoda Bolen elaborates on the female archetypes, relating them to Goddesses in mythology.¹² While Bolen's discussion centers on the concept of normalcy and suppression within a given culture, her discussion on the presence of archetypes within the female psyche against the backdrop of culturally constructed mythologies reflects a parallel concern found in the photographs from *The Specter of Nature*. Both are investigating the role representation plays in issues of storytelling and humankind's narrative of desire and Nature.

Mythology brings to light, pardon the pun, the complicated issue of Nature and culture. Through Bolen's examples of the goddess archetypes, human nature is compartmentalized into various figures, and it is through this demarcation that culture exists. So, culture created a mythology to explain natural phenomena, but within those definitions were displays of the archetypes that Jung discovered as inherited forms of the collective unconscious and which Bolen describes as the goddesses in everywoman.¹³ By examining a variety of representational forms, within mythology, religious iconography, and storytelling, I began to depict figural forms embedded within paper and surroundings

¹² Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Everywoman: A New Psychology of Women*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

¹³ Ibid.

of a decorative origin. Visually, I chose to depict these ideas as figural forms embedded into decorative surroundings. For instance, within the photograph *Untitled (a.k.a. Hand)* (fig. 7) I created a figure obscured by cut out patterns, that when combined and backlit suggests shadows of Nature. It does not have a clear form, nor does it have tactile existence. It is a reflection on creation stories and anthropomorphized Nature found within storytelling, this photograph offers a moment where the subject of narrative materializes just as quickly as it fades.

Using the cut paper as a silhouette and as foliage, I play with the figural relationship to its settings. Creating the figure and the foliage from the same material comments on the mythologies that explain origins through human relationships. It also turns back around and reflects on the human creation of controlled Nature; found within the patterns on the papers; and my own hand that created the cuts that form the ‘leaves’ and tendrils found within the image. The photograph itself merges these oscillating reflections into a single plane. Even as the photograph presents its trace on the two-dimensional plane, its ability to trace the lighting, textures and edges of the papers creates the illusion of three-dimensional space again, reflecting the complex reality of visual transcription.



Fig. 5. Fragonard, Jean-Honore. *The Swing*. Oil on canvas. 35x32 in. 1766.



Fig. 6. Gauguin, Paul. *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*
Oil on canvas. 53 $\frac{3}{4}$ X 147 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. 1897.



Fig. 7. *Untitled (a.k.a. Hand)*. 2010. Digital inkjet print. 40x30in.

V. Visual Display

The saturated colors found in many of the photographs for *The Specter of Nature* come from the projection of light through costume material that is serving as a backdrop to the paper cutouts. This arrangement allows me to create silhouettes and shadows while projecting the artificial colors (from the fabrics) associated with manufactured childhood fantasies. The colors that result from lighting through the costume fabrics are those of extreme saturation and highly artificial in nature, creating an obvious statement that these images are not truly of Nature, but of another form designed by a human hand.

As my images explore the familiar forms of Nature, I chose to arrange the imagery by considering color as a theme that moves through the photographs. The installation of my images in the gallery was arranged in overall tones from dark to light. Creating a cyclical transition through the space as a way to suggest a movement and change over time. Choosing large prints in delicate frames created a unique perspective of the papers and scenes photographed; toying with the illusion of a consuming space such as Nature, and an intimate space such as the studio setting these were created within.

My installation included white frames to highlight and exaggerate the vivid colors of the photographs, while addressing the white walls of the institution in a subtle manner (fig. 8). Highlighting the changes that have taken place from the ornamental interiors of previous centuries to the bare interiors of the 20th century. The white itself can be considered a part of the wall, framing an entrance into the new space depicted within the photograph. In this way the artwork is placed within the context of moving back and forth

within the histories of representation and presentation. As my images are not representative of a particular time, but have been influenced by a shroud of historical connections to Nature and the figure in art, the white suggests a purity of form and a contemporary context of modern simplicity. Detailed beading on the frame still winks in the direction of previous styles.

Through the motif of light to dark/dark to light between the images, I offer a comment on beginnings and endings; thus offering a familiar motif that connects and contains the work within a cycle that reflects Nature and our own cyclical experiences of time. Embedded within these images are materials derived from experiences of a past, projections of a future narrative, all offered within the changing moment of the present.

The final consideration in my arrangement of images was done by arranging the imagery through the spectrum of color, offering a subtle play on the metaphor of the rainbow. The rainbow, though sometimes dismissed as cliché, is still a form that still suggests a magical within the landscape, one that is not created by man but which occurs after a storm has passed and which emerges as the rains dissipates. This reference allows me to transform the gallery space into a space of hope and change. While the rainbow is not addressed directly within any single image in my show, through this arrangement demonstration the spectrum of colors, I have found a way to express my belief in the gallery as a space of transformation. In this way I am again attempting to recognize a pattern, the pattern of archetype, of history and of materials, in the hope that through a freedom of association my audience can continue to investigate and change the patterns of the past.



Fig. 8. *The Specter of Nature* (Installation view). 2010.

VI: Conclusion

In conclusion, through this series *The Specter of Nature*, I attempted, as many women have, to merge an awareness of past suppressive cultural modes with an idea that allows the female to express her character through various forms of fantasy. By creating this space I am reflecting, through photography and design, on humankind's ability to manipulate surroundings. I promote a diverse historical approach that includes traditional cultural forms (such as the decorative, the arabesque, printed papers and fabrics). My images become a place where light and shadow meet, working to both orient and disorient our constructed desires.

Keeping in mind that these materials lean toward what we think of as the conventionally feminine, (flowers, patterns, materiality of form). I was concerned how these works might be viewed, that my viewers might miss the point and not respond to the transformational nature of my approach. I am not using attractive patterns or decorative flowers to make pretty pictures for example. Rather within the work I am both celebrating and critiquing that which is relegated to female imagery and female desire: the decorative. I am exploiting the decorative as a narrative form to examine the underlying issues of the female body and its ambiguous relationship with Nature. Considering my viewers' responses to these photographs and the subject matter itself, I came to realize that the fundamental issues within representations of Nature and its transcription to decorative forms and patterns was not isolated to the domestic realm as one might conceive when considering the long history of the female figure's relationship to Nature in the Arts.

While the decorative nature of my materials is very much a presence in some images, such as *Untitled (a.k.a. Rococo in White)* (fig. 1), in others the decorative quality is utilized as a form of shadow, highlighting the truth behind such designs: that they are reflections or tracings from humans of an ideal or notion that cannot be found within actual Nature. These shadows force an ascent into an image space that plays with forms and the viewers' expectations, creating subtle changes from forms to figures; in the end, requiring an investment from the audience to spend both time and their imaginations on the potential narratives that prefaced the image(s) and the potential narrative that follows. Often, because of this requirement to complete the work introspectively, reactions varied on the story, but many responded to these as works derived of fantastic tales, such as Fairy Tales and mythologies.

Through this work, I invent a magical place where various narratives, reflective on various cultures, opening up a space for exploration. Though I hesitate to describe these stories as *universal*, intersecting themes are presented in my imagery through an ambiguous space. Whether directly using the human silhouette against the backdrop of Nature and the decorative, or minus the human silhouette and the presence of manufactured Nature, the viewer is invited to imagine and create a world of intrigue and ambiguity where Nature and the body intersect, laying the ground work for new meaning.

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