Listening to the Anthropocene

Douglas Cushing

This essay contains fragmentary reflections constituting, in their correspondence, a premise drawing together the works of Cynthia Camlin, Erik Hagen, Kelly Jazvac, and Lorella Paleni under the aegis of *Listening to the Anthropocene*. In brief, this exhibition proposes a non-hierarchal relation between all the constituents of the Anthropocene (the epoch in which human activity has become a dominant shaper of environment and climate). This includes humans and non-humans, animate and inanimate entities. All beings communicate, but many do so in modes more obscure than our systems of signs and symbols, and in ways that exceed rational thought. Art plays a key role here. It is a shared sphere in which we might hear the world's address and begin to contemplate alternate paths forward.

Contested Modernity and the Anthropocene

When I began working on *Listening to the Anthropocene*, I had recently revisited the 1818 version of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. The resonances between Shelley's novel and the ethical vexations of our Anthropocenic world were striking. Have we not created monsters—in ocean acidification, greenhouse gas emissions, plastic pollution, climate change, and species mass extinction—that seem to slip more from our control every day? Do we not suffer at the hands of our monsters? It is not surprising that Shelley's book, allegorically addressing humanity's technological hubris and its quest for dominion over nature, remains a touchtone in environmental discussions. Shelly's novel was moreover rooted in an atmosphere of climate anxiety. She began writing the work in 1816, during the so-called "year without a summer." Volcanic activity in what is now Indonesia temporarily affected global climate. Temperatures dropped, rivers froze, cold rain inundated Europe, and crops failed leading to famine and social unrest. Hence, a global, natural disaster formed the real-life backdrop behind *Frankenstein*'s sense of calamity. It is inscribed into the work's very creation, transformed into a vision of manmade disaster.

Environmental commentators frequently cite *Frankenstein* as an admonition against technology that outstrips ethics, against recklessly superseding nature and despoiling it in the process. Many climate-conscious readers glean a directive from the book to withdraw from nature and curb our technology. Alternately, philosopher Bruno Latour argues in "Love your Monsters" that protagonist Victor Frankenstein's ethical failure is not his use of forbidden knowledge, producing the abhorrent creature, but his abandoning that creation to itself. For Latour, Shelley's work does not suggest a need for technological regression or disengagement from nature. Rather, he insists, the work directs us toward a need to further enmesh ourselves in nature, advancing beneficial technologies and forging an intimacy with the "panoply of nonhuman natures." Acknowledging this range of readings related to our topic at hand, my interpretation invites another approach to Frankenstein, one that broadens our inquiry into the meaning and dynamics of the Anthropocene by way of art's imaginative capacity.

The book's arc is simple. In short, Frankenstein creates a monster and deserts it, regrets his creation after it does harm, agrees to make it a companion and then reneges, suffers as the monster destroys all he loves, and then pursues it to the North Pole before dying. Structurally, Shelley's volume is a frame narrative in which Captain Walton's accounts bookend the stories of Victor Frankenstein and his unnamed creation. But are these all of the key protagonists? I propose that there is one more, around whom the story revolves. Here, it is important to note that Shelley was inextricably engaged with Romanticism. It was her milieu. Given that fact, I propose a reading of the novel re-centered, not upon Walton, Frankenstein, or his monster, but upon nature: loved, betrayed, and above all, communicating.

Historically, Romanticism was a pendant development against the Enlightenment. Both philosophies placed a premium on liberty, education, and progress, but their means and goals differed. For example, whereas the *philosophes* (Enlightenment thinkers) elevated reason, empiricism, and materialism (belief that matter determines reality), the Romantics advocated for openness to the irrational, a metaphysics that reconciled Idealism (reality determined by mind) with materialism and natural philosophy (i.e., science), a focus on feeling and aesthetics, and the promotion of imagination. Moreover, for the Romantics, language was a poetic medium with generative power, rather than the *philosophes*' descriptive, taxonomic dissecting knife.

Each movement also presented a different stance on nature. For the *philosophes*, nature was arguable a collection of mere things waiting to be isolated, tamed, labeled, valued according to utility, and finally transformed into knowledge, resource, or potential resource. Its mysteries required, above all, disenchantment. Consider, for example, early British Enlightenment philosopher John Locke's insistence in his *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) that nature possessed little inherent value. He asserted, "land that is left wholly to nature, that hath no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called, as indeed it is, waste; and we shall find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing." "It is labour, then," he soon continues,

> which puts the greatest part of value upon land, without which it would scarcely be worth any thing: it is to that we owe the greatest part of all its useful products; for all that the straw, bran, bread, of that acre of wheat, is more worth than the product of an acre of as good land, which lies waste, is all the effect of labour: for it is not barely the plough-man's pains, the reaper's and thresher's toil, and the baker's sweat, is to be counted into the bread we eat; the labour of those who broke the oxen, who digged and wrought the iron and stones, who felled and framed the timber employed about the plough, mill, oven, or any other utensils, which are a vast number, requisite to this corn, from its being feed to be sown to its being made bread, must all be charged on the account of labour, and received as an effect of that: *nature and the earth furnished only the almost worthless materials, as in themselves.* (my emphasis)

Valuing nature in a limited, economic sense, Locke deprecates it. He subordinates it to human needs, unable to conceive of a nature valued in itself or for itself–a nature with

rights. Similarly, Carl Linnaeus observed in his volume *The System of Nature* (1735): "All that is useful to man originates from these natural objects; hence the industry of mining or metallurgy; plant-industry or agriculture and horticulture; animal husbandry, hunting and fishing." While Linnaeus's view is more constrained, their messages dovetail. First, both statements open a hierarchal gap between humanity and nature. Second, our enlightened task in nature is a *mission civilisatrice*, or civilizing mission (to employ the colonial term and its associations). Nature here awaits refinement, organization, and exploitation.

For the Romantics, as well as being a source of knowledge and resources, nature was also a wellspring of intangible qualities and affects, such as wonder, beauty, and sublimity. Nature deserved respect. For early German Romantics like Novalis (the pen name of Friedrich von Hardenberg), nature took on another role relative to the divine or absolute, i.e., the organic, undetermined totality. For these Romantics, history amounted the progressive self-realization of the divine in nature. As scholar Frederick Beiser explains, they "wanted to emphasize that all forms of human creativity are simply appearances, manifestations, and developments of the creativity of nature itself." Nature here is an aspect of the absolute that is nearly synonymous with it. It cannot be overstated that humanity's relation to nature was central to Romanticism broadly. The tension between Enlightenment and Romantic values with regards to nature arguably form one of the unresolved characteristic rifts of the modern world. We struggle to hold in our minds and ethics two versions of nature, one aesthetic and spiritual and the other utilitarian.

Returning to my earlier contention, I read *Frankenstein* through a Romantic lens. Nature, I insist, is the book's fourth major protagonist. It is largely mute, in terms of language as we normally think of it. Nevertheless, nature communicates. In one sense, the creature speaks synecdochally as nature made manifest. Its journey is one from base nature (inanimate matter), to an animate entity, to a sentient and speaking thing, which draws it into proximity to humanity and divinity. Then, rejected by man, the monster returns to the fold. Recall that the monster first learns language via an impoverished family, near whose cottage he secretly shelters. "These people," he reflects,

> possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers . . . I discovered the names that were given to some of the most familiar objects of discourse: I learned and applied the words fire, milk, bread, and wood.

It is noteworthy that the creature innately recognizes the appearance of others' feelings before he grasps their system of signification. Once the creature acquires human language, he attempts to engage. The blind father listens, briefly. Then the family bursts in, violently rebuffing the monster as a dangerous *other*. He is, at this point in the narrative, the worst sort of abomination for the enlightened mind. He is a hybrid, situated on the frontier between humanity and nature. He is a hideous categorical rupture. In a Romantic sense, however, the monster becomes an embodiment of nature forsaken,

violated, and vengeful. Refused, the monster claims the inhospitable corners of nature as his home. "The desert mountains and dreary glaciers," he declares, "are my refuge . . . These bleak skies I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow beings." Caught between worlds, the monster chooses nature over man.

Throughout *Frankenstein*, nature also speaks through poetic and visual affect. For example, Victor Frankenstein wistfully remembers his lost accord with it: "When happy, inanimate nature had the power of bestowing on me the most delightful sensations." He continues, "A Serene sky and verdant fields, filled me with ecstasy." Later, upon returning to his familial home, he implores nature warily: "'Dear mountains! My own beautiful lake! How do you welcome your wanderer? Your summits are clear; the sky and the lake are blue and placid. Is this to prognosticate peace, or to mock my unhappiness?'" In the mountains, nature expresses its fury over Victor's trespasses. The "thunder burst[s] with a terrific crash over [his] head," as "vivid flashes of lightening . . . illuminating the lake and making it seem like a vast sheet of fire." This storm has communicative capacity. And it is not merely a question of symbolism or allusion to damnation, but of direct affect.

While nature rebukes Frankenstein, perhaps Shelley's ideal for concord with it is expressed best in the doomed Henry Clerval. This childhood friend, Victor reflects, "was a being formed in the 'very poetry of nature.' . . . But even human sympathies were not sufficient to satisfy his eager mind. The scenery of external nature, which others regard only with admiration, he loved with ardour." What sympathies does Clerval seek if not that of other humans? Why, those of nature of course! Clerval seeks intimate connectivity with nature. Elsewhere, it is this same friend who first "taught [Victor] to love the aspect of nature." Thus, Clerval is a foil for Victor's fallen state, his self-estrangement from nature. Similarly, early in the book, Victor lauds his friend by repeating lines from William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey":

> The sounding cataract
> Haunted him like a passion: the tall rock,
> The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms, were then to him
> An appetite; a feeling, and a love,
> That had no need of a remoter charm,
> By thought supplied, or any interest
> Unborrow'd from the eye.

Against Frankenstein's nature-corrupting ideas, his obsession with natural philosophy, Shelly sets Clerval's artistic naïveté, his communion and communication with nature. Shelly's ideal soul is open to the "very poetry of nature," wherein colors and forms convey appetite, a feeling and a love.

The point of this exegesis is this: in art (understood in its broadest sense), not only does nature gain a voice, but its value beyond economy and utility becomes apparent when we speculate as to what the world is for all its constituents, recognized as equal

stakeholders. Nature, in *Frankenstein*, rewards the seeker of harmony and condemns its transgressor. Yes, Shelly anthropomorphizes nature, but she also shows us a path towards recognizing its agency. Moreover, this illustration demonstrates that our intellectual inheritance from the contest between Enlightenment and Romantic periods is a vexed one. Yet, understanding how this history shapes us might reveal paths leading out from the labyrinth that we have constructed. This is not a call to reject reason blindly. Climate change denial shows the dangers in such a stance. Rather, it is an invitation to rationally choose to use our imagination and sensual faculties to suppose a different, more empathetic relation to nature.

Interventions and Interrogations: Curating the Anthropocene

The works of Cynthia Camlin, Erik Hagen, Kelly Jazvac, and Lorella Paleni do not need me. They are fully realized and compelling unto themselves. Nevertheless, as the curator choosing these artists and objects, I bring them into conversation. I present them for consideration. My curatorial practice reframes the works' intellectual and aesthetic contours, adding surplus meaning to that which is already replete. Etymologically, the word "curator" is related the Latin, *curare*, meaning "to take care of." This care—concern for welfare—must, I insist, proceed from the needs of all parties to the exhibition: artists, works, institution, and audiences. I am attempting to forge a community of disparate entities. I must take care; this is a labor of intervention.

There is a sense in which we, the "anthropos" (that is, humans) of the Anthropocene, have appointed ourselves de facto curators of the earth. We chose, separate, sift, recombine, reshape, add, and leave things—or better yet, leave *beings*—changed on a planetary scale. The world does not need us, but we are here, and we change it in manifold ways, great and small. Our interventions, however, frequently account only for that which we need or want. We forge distance in our systems. We invent organizations and economies. And when we turn our back on them, they supplant individual agency with institutional will. The prerogatives of these diffuse, socially produced beings displace, in time, the general needs and welfare of people and non-human nature alike. The idea of culpability in the Anthropocene is fraught.

As art historian T.J. Demos notes, the "we" of the Anthropocene is not evenly distributed across the anthropos. The term "Anthropocene," as well as the visual culture (didactic and artistic) that often accompanies it, he insists, present a terminological dilemma. As Demos explains in *Against the Anthropocene*, while the appellation helps build awareness, the word and its associated images also tend to universalize the causes and effects of our environmental and related social catastrophes. Etymologically and rhetorically, "Anthropocene" implies that all humans are equally responsible and suffer uniformly. The greatest contributors to climate change and other environmental damage, Demos argues, are transnational industry and capitalist economies. Here he highlights the petrochemical industry as the epitome of advanced capitalism seeking limitless, unsustainable growth, divorced from obligations to common welfare as well natural laws limiting the growth. While the majority of the vast wealth garnered by the private sector is socially concentrated in the hands of a few, the most acute burdens of climate change,

Demos notes, fall upon the masses broadly, and, especially, economically marginalized peoples around the world. These ill effects are felt most keenly by those already injured by the modern legacies of imperialism and colonialism. Hence Demos and likeminded scholars prefer alternate, incisive terms such as “Capitalocene” in describing our epoch.

While acknowledging the legitimacy of Demos’s observations, this exhibition retains—with reservations—the term “Anthropocene” in its title for several reasons. First, the name accords with the prevalence of contemporary discourse, rendering it widely intelligible. Second, while Demos is correct about the imbalance of causes and effects in the Anthropocene, the root problem is still grounded in human activities and institutions. Global production and consumption in excess of needs are particularly human phenomena (even if not all persons, nations, and societies do not partake equally). Moreover, while culpability might well be concentrated in the domain of industrialized, capitalist societies, it is prejudice to assume that all of the solutions to our problems are similarly allocated. “Capitalocene” lays blame squarely and rightly, but it also subtly implies that the guilty party alone might set matters right by atoning. There is another weakness in the term Anthropocene, however, which is worth acknowledging. Tacit in the word is the idea that only humanity, in isolation from nature or through harnessing it, can repair a broken planet. Instead, we might consider ourselves integrated into nature, finding solutions not simply *for* it but in concert with it.

This exhibition is not a panacea to the problems of our intervention in the environment—how could it be? Instead, *Listening to the Anthropocene* is a way of commencing a conversation. It is a call for receptivity to the whole world, to the plight and needs of human *and* non-human beings. We are unskilled listeners. But if we are to take care, we must learn to pay attention. The connection between art and nature is not an idle one. From Plato to Immanuel Kant to the Romantics, Western thought is full of meditations on the connection between the two spheres. In *Listening to the Anthropocene*, they are essentially connected.

Nature, like art, is constructed. First nature is categorically two-fold. As the primordial whole of everything, nature precedes and begets us; hence we have the preponderance of metaphors like “mother nature.” Second, “nature” is a category invented in order to inaugurate the dichotomy of humanity’s inside versus its outside. We invent nature as a ground against which we can self-define and elevate our species. Art, for its part, is the medium in which culture is born, reflected, and constantly remade. As a generator of culture, art is always within and outside of us. Art is also a primary sphere in which we internalize and assimilate nature into culture. In the Anthropocene, nature reveals itself as constructed in a third, more material sense, like art. Nature is inextricably shaped by human activity, and we are in turn reshaped by it. In acknowledging that we live in the Anthropocene, that we intervene and are mutually affected, we might erase the imagined divide between humanity and nature. We can finally admit that we are entangled with nature intellectually and physically at every level.

Exhibiting the Language of Things

Listening to the Anthropocene is grounded in a pair of premises. This first is an appeal for reflection, through art, upon our collective interventions and entanglements on this planet as well as an attempt to begin to re-center our ethics on the total community of earth's beings. This requires attentiveness to the outcomes of our actions as well as fostering our ability to empathize with, and open ourselves to, the being of non-human subjects. Following from the exhibition's first premise, a second key aspect of the exhibition proposes an alternative to those unilateral interventions that we might term *acting-upon* the world. Listening, here, is instead a form of *acting-with*. We might recognize that the world communicates in non-verbal languages, which, from our human vantage, we frequently mistake for lacking content or meaning.

Art might be our translator. The rub is that for art to mediate between the human and non-human world, so that we might listen, we must first return nature and its constituents to a standing that Western culture has denied them. The idea of extending something like subjecthood to nature and all its parts will seem absurd to many–a mystical slide into animism. The suggestion is, after all, antithetical to the false dichotomy in which subjective consciousness, agency, and language use are solely human attributes, absent from nature. That dualism notably hinges upon a particular species of language, one that colonizes nature by labeling its parts, making them admissible as objects of inquiry and refinement.

Is there an alternative to such a dualism? Yes, but it requires the seemingly impossible; we must decenter our ontology (our understanding of being) from ourselves. We must take a metaphysical leap and imagine the being of non-human entities. This is a speculative activity intended to bypass rational thought insofar as it would deny the possibility of any exchange. It belongs to an ethics of potential where the risk of descending into nonsense is worth the chance at expanding the species' horizons.

Thus, I insist, nature speaks myriad languages. They are languages neither of taxonomy nor of human needs alone. Philosopher Walter Benjamin suggests something similar in his 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." "There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature," Benjamin asserts, "that does not in some way partake of language." All language, he indicates, is rooted in the divine logos. Beings (animate and inanimate) communicate themselves not *through* language use but *in* it, he insists. Human language, in its particularity, is one of naming. But there are also mute languages belonging to the "material community of things." "The language of things," Benjamin argues, "can pass into the [human] language of knowledge and name only through translation–so many translations, so many languages."

Notably, Benjamin was steeped in the thought of the German Romantics, for whom, as I explained, nature was an appearance of God or the absolute. The philosopher placed the sonorous and graphic naming language of humanity closer to divine logos than the mute language of things. Thus his ontology remained hierarchal. Yet he established a paradigm in which human receptivity to the non-verbal language of things was prerequisite for naming. Stated another way, we can name (translate into our language)

only that which first presents itself to us to be named. For Benjamin, we must listen to things telling us how to regard and address them before they become knowable.

Benjamin also gives art a key role in his essay, hypothesizing that there are languages particular to art. "Just as the language of poetry is partly, if not solely, founded in the name language of man," he suggests, "it is very conceivable that the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing-languages, that in them we find the translation of things into an infinitely higher language." "We are concerned here," he continues, "with nameless, non-acoustic languages, languages issuing from matter; here we should recall the material community of things in their communication. Moreover, the communication of things is certainly communal in a way that grasps the world as such as an undivided whole." These final words are, of course, a direct reference to the Romantic absolute. Simply put, Benjamin assigns to art the role of bridging between human language, the language of non-human nature, and the infinite, divine whole. Thus, in making and receiving art, we are listening to nature in manner that owes much to Romantic metaphysics. The trick is to be bolder than Benjamin, loosening the hold of a center that is humanity or divine logos. Instead, we must imagine a flat field of interconnected, unique beings without center: a community participating in a unity.

Speaking of Forms and Spaces: Grids, Flows, Weaves, Arrays, Imbrications

Let us then, for a moment, take a position akin to Benjamin, speculating that art communicates in a language related both to that of humans and the mute language of things. Art gazes back at us knowingly, Janus headed, fluent in mute and verbose communications, ready to translate. How, then, does the art in *Listening to the Anthropocene* communicate? Here, I will call attention to a few avenues of entry into the work. Alternate paths through the work, however, are no less valid. I offer only points in a constellation, seen from my vantage, with my background and interests in mind–no more. In keeping with my theme, these observations are conversation starters.

One manner in which visual art partakes of language—a means shared with nature—is through making itself apparent. As Benjamin argues, art-as-thing conveys what it is in its language. Living things do this too. Some even specialize. They engage, for instance, in mimesis, camouflage, and signaling. Colors, patterns, and forms of flora and fauna draw pollinators and mates, conceal from predation and conceal predators, communicate peril, invite travelers to carry away seeds, and more. Some cephalopods and lizards even change aspect contingently. What of inanimate nature? Does the seabed reveal its appearance to the octopus before that creature mimics it? Let us choose provisionally to say yes, it does so in its thing-language. The language of inanimate entities consists in expressing color, form, surface texture, pattern, temperature, hardness, and so forth. And just as a mockingbird borrows the language of other avians, so the green anole outside my window borrows the language of the rusty-red fence upon which it perches, changing its appearance to echo that communication. Mocking art in his *Republic*, Plato chided that one might as well carry a mirror about, "making" the sun, heavens, earth, plants, animals. The products of mimetic art were, for the philosopher,

mere appearances–thin imitations of nature. What if, instead, the contents of the speculum were not imitations, but translations? Plato's mirror then becomes a polyglot.

Nature is partially, like visual art, formally constituted. Forms are curious; they exist as cooperative ventures between external causes and internal faculties. In order for a form to be intelligible in some way, the receiving mind must be prepared. It must be able to separate, for instance, figure from ground or appendage from main body. Immanuel Kant counted intuitions of time and space, as well as the categories and concepts, as prerequisites for human perception. Otherwise, our senses would yield only a plenum of undifferentiated stimuli. Yet, forms cannot be reduced to mental products alone. Nature uses forms constantly for communicating and frustrating communication. And it would continue to do so even we ceased to exist. Form as named and circumscribed for our cognitive apparatus belong to us. The rest of what constitutes a form is nature's common property. Art can provide a common ground.

One of Paul Cézanne's most famous and cryptic counsels on painting was this: "Deal with nature by means of the cylinder, sphere, and cone." Did the artist mean that these forms exist in nature awaiting the artist's discovery? Or did he advise imposing these rational structures upon nature? The question has perplexed artists, critics, and historians. Other figures have certainly long proposed that there are inherent geometries in nature. The pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Empedocles of Akragas was sure that the irreducible elements constituting the cosmos were four in number: earth, fire, air, and water. In Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*, the philosopher lent these fundamental elements solid, irreducible forms, composed internally of equilateral triangles. "To earth let us assign a cubical form," Timaeus explains, continuing, "for earth is the most immovable of the four and the most plastic of all bodies." Water is given the next most stable form (the icosahedron), then air (the octahedron), and finally fire (the tetrahedron). For Cézanne, the question of form was less metaphysical. It was more a question inventing a practical mode of representation that felt modern and authentic to him in his artistic engagement with the world. Working in the shadow of the Impressionists' ethereal paintings, Cézanne sought a solidity of form that was not simply naturalistic or mimetic, not merely visual, but also haptic and cerebral. He simultaneously embraced the naturalness of nature and the constructedness of art, reconciling them on his canvases. His forms belonged to two worlds at once.

Historians often label Cézanne a forerunner of the Cubists. Indeed, he sought underlying forms in nature and he included multiple, simultaneous viewpoints in his compositions. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque counted Cézanne as a primary source. We might therefore call Cézanne the inadvertent grandfather of one of Cubism's most famous forms. The so-called "modernist grid" undergirded the work of the Cubists, as well as that of luminaries from Kasimir Malevich to Piet Mondrian. Later it was transformed and even distilled by artists like Mark Rothko and Agnes Martin. In fact, the grid is emblematic of Modernism–sometimes conspicuously present and elsewhere tacitly implied by the arrangement of shapes on surfaces. The grid, composed of squares or cubes, is among the most stable geometric organizations imaginable: hence Plato's choice of the cube as the basis of earth. Despite the philosopher's insistence, however, the grid appears to us not to be inherently natural but decidedly artificial. Art historian Rosalind

Kraus wrote of the form's ubiquity and longevity in Modernism, noting its being "flattened, geometricized, [and] ordered." "It is," she asserted, "what art looks like when it turns its back on nature."

Critical of rigid human systems, Cynthia Camlin's multi-panel paintings in *Listening to the Anthropocene* employ the grid in a manner that is double-edged. They speak of the human mania for ordering nature and unyieldingly pressing it into service. Simultaneously, however, they undermine the very security that the grid implies. In her *Waterland* series, the grid permeates. It forms the overall mosaic arrangement of the physical panels making up both *Water Fragment* and *Island of Ought and Naught*. This superstructure acts as counterpoint, however, to the unstable, shifting grids that scaffold the land and ice within the works. These latter grids groan, shiver, and buckle. Individual cells within them are framed in lighter tone than their contents, producing a network of gridlines; collectively, these intersecting lines form a structure like a cage or a mesh container that strains to hold its contents against enormous force.

The central element of the *Island of Ought and Naught* is a massive columnar body, the titular island rising up from water like a sculptural pedestal. Here, Camlin evokes the final island homes of the great auk, an extinct bird whose existence and end Elizabeth Kolbert addresses in her book *The Sixth Extinction*–one of Camlin's sources. In its color, Camlin's island resembles Funk Island, located off of Newfoundland, Canada, and in its shape, it echoes that of Iceland's Edley Island. Both were once homes for great auks, whose populations were decimated by human pillaging. On Edley Island, profit-seeking poachers killed the last pair of known birds, seeking specimens for sale. Camlin's island is haunted by the birds' absence and by humanity's destructive capacity.

Camlin's grids also evoke geologic time scales. Individual modules within the grid of *Island of Ought and Naught* evoke the feeling of vitrines brimming with geological specimens: slabs of agate or similar rocks, suggested by bands of stacked browns, blacks, and greys with tints including pink, red, orange, violet, and blue throughout. This patterning reinforces the overall geometry of the work while metaphorically suggesting strata: layer upon layer of sediment sandwiched together over unimaginable spans of time, or else metamorphic layers created by immense heat and pressure. These layers speak of distant pasts, of natural upheaval, and of mass-extinction events. Some of these bands are oriented horizontally, but others rise vertically, intimating the upward thrusting of the earth's crust. The contrast between the violence of geological forces and the violence of the great auk's extinction at the hands of human beings plays out as a tragedy of phantoms atop the island's tabletop stage.

Parallel forces are implicated in the icy grid of *Water Fragments*. We are drawn to consider the mutability of the ice, the slow process of glacial formation, as well as their calving and melting, accelerated by climate change. Camlin herself points out the metaphor of the iceberg: so much of the danger is invisible, ice riding just beneath the waves. Here, instead of the rocky hues of *Island of Ought and Naught*, the grid contains modules of cool hues: the blues of ice and the greens of ice algae, signs of an ecosystem beset. Decreased ice cover, sparked by planetary warming, will lead to diminished ice

algae, a change whose effects will ripple outward into the arctic ecosystem and beyond. The undeniable beauty of Camlin's works belies the monumentality of the tragedies they address. Grid as form communicates the stress afflicted upon the natural world by the imposition of human systems. It appears unsustainable, but the grid is recalcitrant.

Another type of monumentality permeates Erik Hagen's work: one of time, or at least its guise. We are presented throughout with a thematic tension between nature and artifice. Works from Hagen's *Fossils of the Anthropocene* series are quiet and contemplative. Vast time seems to have had a hand in their making. While his bounding shapes tend towards regular geometry, the works' pictorial planes vacillate formally between discrete shapes, shapes in the process or coalescing or dissipating, and vast regions of organic flow. Subtle gradations and color changes allow for both local differentiation and continuity between adjacent surface regions. In a paradoxical sense, formlessness becomes Hagen's distinguishing form in the series. This provides a stark contrast to the modernist grid that Camlin employs so critically. Hagen's *Fossils* are haptically stable—solid, appearing to have been formed by earth and environment—and yet simultaneously unstable, or given to entropy, because of their tendency to eschew regularized, organized spatial relations. The combination of color, surface pattern, and texture in these works act as indices of flow (e.g., suggestions of ripples from liquid erosion of solid surfaces, the finger-like movement of fluid in fluid, markers of Brownian motion, rock etched by eons of winding wind currents, striations left by glaciers, etcetera). Surfaces appear shaped by gradual, natural processes. In *Civic*, these flows even resemble the veining of marble—metamorphic carbonate rock whose veins are layers of impurities transformed by heat and pressure. All of these drifting patterns suggest monumental slowness.

Moments of punctuated, discrete form sharply contrast these organic flows. Sometimes these are irregular shapes of the kind nature might produce by means such as cracking in mud or ice. For the most part, however, the distinct forms in the *Fossils of the Anthropocene* series are the inclusions of geometrically regular objects, clearly manufactured and ranging from coins to consumer products. These markers of human commerce appear buried by time and recovered by way of excavation.

The word "fossil" comes from Latin; *fosillis* means, simply, "dug up." The word's etymology does not specify what is to be recovered. Yet, when we think of fossils, we inevitably imagine buried organic beings: plants and animals, their bones and bodies preserved through mineralization and other natural processes. Here, however, the worked cavities and surface eruptions reveal not corporeal remains, but our durable products. These fossils are relics of industrial ingenuity. Our consumer legacy stares back at us, unearthed from its rocky matrix. We imagine ourselves as ghosts looking over the shoulder of a future archeologist or paleontologist, a member of succeeding species or an alien visitor. This is what remains of us, we realize. Dug up in this manner, our disused consumer goods also become unfamiliar in their uselessness. Their being is made strange and they draw our attention as if seen for the first time. And they seem to remember us, makers who forsook them. Our fossils regard us uncomfortably.

It is worth noting the mordant humor implicit in Hagen's choice of inclusions. He selects, for instance, a cell phone (communication silenced), money (the corpse of an economy), the emblem from a Honda Civic (play between object and word, between fossil-fuel use and responsibility to community), and toys (innocence lost). The materiality of Hagen's *Fossils* presents another surprising tension. As one carefully examines the surface of these works, the artifice of the natural matrices becomes apparent. Their constuctedness emerges. This is most evident and surprising in the inclusion of microbeads (tiny, colorful spheres of plastic) suspended in resin of works like *Coins, Mosquito*. From a few feet away, the beads appear as pigmentation, resembling the colors and textures of ceramic glazes. The appearance of relatively natural material of ceramic (for its basic component is earth, decorated with minerals and metallic oxides suspended in silica glass) soon gives way to a reality of plastic and more plastic.

Looking closely, another deception becomes apparent. Some of Hagen's inclusions, such as his coins, are resin casts of the manmade objects rather than the objects themselves. They are double artifices, material tricksters. Throughout *Fossils*, Hagen uses form and material to undermine the dichotomy of natural versus unnatural. The re-mineralization and mineral casting of natural fossils seems to have been taken up by a new geology of plastics. This is not so fanciful as it might seem. In light of the recent discovery of rocks formed by aggregates of plastics, minerals, wood, shells, and detritus—named "plastiglomerates" by artist Kelly Jazvac and scientists Patricia Corcoran and Charles Moore—Hagen's synthetic combinations seem like plausible future material realities. The play between ironically artificial fossil and simulated natural matrix upsets expectations. The whole of each object becomes a perverse, if aesthetically appealing, false relic of real human intervention in the world.

Hagen's maps are in one sense didactic representations of the coastal effects of rising sea levels. As cartographic images, grids and their connotations are implicit even when elided. In another sense, however, aesthetic experience here functions as analog to the change described empirically. This is especially true when Hagen installs massive ice blocks atop his maps, set into basins. This is the source of Hagen's video *Ice Meditations*. Ice left to melt over a map and catch basin speaks an audible language of pitch, frequency, and volume, as well as a visible one of form. Entropy carves away at the ice blocks, reducing them to a puddle below. Audible drips communicate progressive transformation of the unseen map' plane, and the transformation of the represented land by extension. Here, scale is a measure not of relative distance or time, but of ruin.

Kelly Jazvac's video installation *Forward Contamination* regards scales of human entanglement in nature ranging from the miniscule to the cosmic. In the process, she unsettles the facile notion of human kind as separable from nature. The first form that the video presents is globular and slightly out of focus, set against a pale blue ground like a washed-out sky or sea. It is mottled, with dirty, whitish surface encrustations on a body of grey translucence. Initially, the scale of the article is indeterminate. It simultaneously suggests objects ranging from tiny beads to vast heavenly bodies. Almost a minute passes before additional forms appear, providing context. Previously seen in isolation, the

spheroid now belongs to an irregular array, a jumbled field spread out across a flat surface. Despite its irregular surface, the object is quite regular compared to the bits of wood, sand, and unidentifiable material surrounding it. The field of the materials is dense in places: clumped, clustered, overlapping, and interwoven. Elsewhere there are clearings between objects; the blue ground presenting a system of complex, irregular, hard-edged shapes. Large items dwarf tiny ones in chaotic combination. On the edge of this collection, the blue plane grows sparse. Individual constituents of the field have definite form, but their collective effect is a formless, accidental mixture. The points of a pair of tweezers enter the frame from the right and begin to sift through the jumble. First they capture and transport the globular object to the periphery. Then the tweezers remove other items, one at a time. These mechanical, metal fingers evoke human hands, sorting, organizing, and intervening. They provide a metonymic correspondence for the disembodied voices that simultaneously discuss NASA's efforts to prevent biological contamination of the other worlds via our spacecraft, even as we despoil our own planet.

The tweezers continue to rove. They select and separate, removing bits of material from the fray to a growing parallel array. There, the tool sets objects of man-made material into a line, ordered apparently by descending size. More join them—green and blue plastic fragments, red, white, and blue synthetic filaments, and other irregular bits. Soon the careful system of cataloguing these foreign bodies gives way to unevenness. The new array is now neither clearly ordered nor given fully to the same chaos as the central pile. Several of the evacuated fragments appear organic in form, but their unnatural color gives them away–deceptive agents, exposed. Other particles look like white stone or eroded seashell. Yet, the tweezers seem to know that they do not belong.

Around the four-minute mark, a drum enters. Its beats are syncopated and arranged in irregular clusters, which intensify in frequency, regularity, and volume over time. The conversation's volume increases in parallel, attempting to rise above the din. Percussion and conversation thread in and out of one another. As listeners, we try with difficulty to pull these simultaneous signals apart. The interlocutors speak of the treaties preventing the ownership of other worlds. They speak of climate change and geological transformation over eons. Antarctica, one voice notes, was once a forest. Yet, those are massive scales of time. The real narrative of this video is about occurrences that have happened in a geological instant. Only when the credits appear is the viewer offered a definitive understanding of the performance. The subject of the video is a core sample, taken from the shores of Lake Ontario, containing natural materials as well as human-made ones, including numerous microplastic fragments. It is striking how pervasively our plastic footprint is dispersed in this sample, only about a hundred and twelve years after Leo Baekeland invented the first commercially viable synthetic plastic.

The play of form and formless, order and disorder in *Forward Contamination* gives way to an epiphany. This sorting of a tiny sample is daunting. The same task performed on a worldwide scale seems impossible at present. We cannot extricate ourselves from nature. We have interwoven our activities into it, changing it at every level. The sample communicates. It speaks of being invaded, of being colonized by human production, consumption, and waste. The tangled materiality of the sample insists

visually upon its hybrid status, speaking through shapes, colors, surfaces, movements. In her other work, Jazvac reclaims vinyl and other plastics for sculptural use. There, as with here, she embraces our castoff monsters and lends them the stage of art from which to speak and confront their makers. *Forward Contamination* presents questions rather than solutions. If we cannot fully erase our mark on nature at this point, how do we best proceed? How could we turn our back on our monsters once they are made?

Lorella Paleni's canvases are richly painted spaces of dialogue as well as sites of ambivalence where we struggle to reconcile our existence with that of non-human nature. They are liminal zones of contact or gap between human and animal spheres of comprehensibility. By extension, these paintings' leitmotif is also relationships broadly, particularly between privileged parties and their others. Paleni's paintings act as curious mirrors where animals sometimes appear as inscrutable phantoms of the real beyond our reach, and elsewhere we seem to be ghosts intruding upon their world. Translation or failure to translate—an inability to assimilate all that always exceeds the translation—drives one's encounter with Paleni's works. Failure to translate does not imply a lack of meaning. Rather it highlights issues of mishearing, incompatibility of apprehensive frameworks, disparity of value systems, and the limitations of human cognition. In Paleni's paintings, we grope about in the dark, and in our groping the myth of human mastery falters.

Galileo Galilei, Paleni's compatriot of centuries past, once claimed, "Philosophy is a great book, which remains open to our gaze (I mean the Universe), but we cannot grasp it unless we first understand its language and are familiar with its characters." Mathematics, he insisted, constituted that language and geometry its symbols. His meaning is plain, but his assertion also points, conversely, to the limits of natural philosophy. For such systems, the unquantifiable is inadmissible. In so far as experience (human and non-human) overflows the metrics applied to it, it verges upon meaninglessness. This is not to say that the somatic functions accompanying experience are immensurable. Rather, such observations are limited to describing the material conditions of a state rather than the gestalt of the state itself. By contrast, while art may also traffic in rational concepts and empirical observations, it additionally admits the superabundance of experience that escapes logical systems. This includes all that is indeterminate, unknowable, or felt. This is art's poetic dimension. Rhetorical devices and figures (metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, symbolism, etcetera) and the abstract associations and affects accompanying formal qualities such as form, color, and line permit direct and indirect access to that which stands outside the rational frame. Paleni's work finds a footing in addressing human-animal coexistence with just such an amalgam of observation and visual poetics.

Within *Unruly* and *Guests*, form dissipates, solidifies, falls into foliate darkness, and emerges again into the light. Plane and line are interwoven like textile and imbricated like scales. Forms flow into one another, even when divided by line: surface color and texture breach such boundaries. Space vacillates between flat, painterly superficiality and naturalistic illusion–between surface and depth. Here is a complex weave of figure and ground, of light and dark, of positive and negative space. Consider the macaque

positioned at the top left of *Unruly*. Outlined in dark browns, its body reveals a thin layer of warm blues and greens throughout–suggesting sky and verdant brush. Figure and ground are dynamic: collapsing into one another, intermingling, and thrusting themselves apart again. Looking at the top-left quadrant of the canvas, the animal's head and face—with reddish skin partially framed by light grey wisps of hair—compete with apparitions of dark vegetation for a space just behind the pictorial plane. Compared to the warmer regions of the painting's bottom right, however, this macaque and its surroundings fall back and begin to dissolve. But seen in isolation again, its right eye and muzzle materialize from these depths, drawing its ephemeral body up with it. Paint is applied in thin layers, impastos, and glazes; it is scratched into, scraped away, and built up again forming a palimpsest of frustrated communications–forays and retreats in a quest to connect. These works are metaphorical looms for material and immaterial forms.

Macaques' faces emerge from the canvas' surfaces, some conspicuous, others reluctant to appear. Some return the viewer's gaze, bold and confrontational. Some steal furtive looks from the depths. Others take no notice. There is a marked vacillation in the gaze returned to us by these beings. It seems to hover between opacity, reticence, and sympathetic exchange (meant here in the sense of "feeling together"). This gaze is markedly uncanny. Might we still retain some latent, primate memory held in common with these close relatives? We search ourselves for ourselves. We search in ourselves for them. We observe ourselves being observed in the eyes of the other. We want to know how they regard us, but we cannot know. We discover a gap, a lack in ourselves.

We are drawn to these faces, but do we address them as individual beings? If not, what must we escape in order to do so? In his book *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche argues that human logic was born from an initial illogic. "As regards both nourishment and hostile animals," he writes, survival favored those who treated "as equal what is merely similar." Thus, human logic assumes a categorical mode of thinking in which our first impulse is to flatten groups of disparate entities, dismissing the particularity of individual members. It is easy to relate to the macaques in Paleni's paintings in a single, uniform fashion, to collectively name them "macaques," classing them as one thing and ending the matter. Alternately, however, without anthropomorphizing, we could admit that the macaques' expressions and attentions differ widely. *Unruly* and *Guests* plead with us to address each animal as a unique subject with its own mode of being in the world.

After their faces, we notice the macaques' hands: organs of touch, grasp, and embrace. Hands seem so familiar to us, even the hands of another. We are prompted to empathize, but if we do, we find ourselves adrift in speculation. What is it to be each of these creatures? What part of their existence lies beyond what I can know? How does my misunderstanding of them shape my interactions with them? How do such miscommunications and misapprehensions shape our attitude towards the whole world? Locke's theory of property and economy, and ideas descending from it, have long justified the "pasturage, tillage, or planting" of formerly wild lands in order to serve the free market. As our species continues to alter these lands, we find ourselves in increasingly close contact with wildlife that we do not understand as beings. We regard

them as mere things. We invade their homes and displace them. These meetings—these episodes of violence—additionally produce new disease vectors affecting our species as well in the process, e.g., HIV, malaria, etcetera. Yet we seem willfully blind to the connection between our self-inflicted damage and the harm we afford to these animal others. All the marketplace asks of us in exchange for progress, it seems, is our sight.

Paleni's *I'll Drown* is an unnerving work. A large, palely painted marine mammal lay upon a table with raised sides. A group of humans position themselves at either side of the creature, making physical contact with it. They seem to be in the middle of a disappearing act, however; they are becoming air-thin, ghostly before our eyes. All that seems concrete of them is their aprons and gloves. The viewer's eye is drawn to the three blue gloves just above the heart of the canvas. They form a triangle. The yellow aprons, the corner of the table, and wedges of floor constitute more triangles. Paleni uses these groups of interlocked triangles to compose her painting in a noticeably academic manner. They lend structure and keep the eye moving predictably. This rational order stands as counterweight to the work's ultimate ambivalence, a structural bulwark against instability of the painting's semantics.

Gloved hands make contact at various points along the creature's body. The purpose of this touch, however, is unclear. Are these people harming the creature? Is it dying or already dead? Are they attempting to save or heal it? Does the creature lie upon a dissecting surface or an operating table? The scene refuses clear answers. It resists our desire for surety. Paleni writes of her art, "Painting itself becomes . . . an open space that welcomes the intruder and the foreign, the untamed, the non-human." I must concur. There is also, however, an alchemy to this painting that transmutes human action into something absolutely foreign and unknowable. We are othered for ourselves and simultaneously invited to explore beyond ourselves. In engaging with such open spaces, we welcome conversations with all those we have pushed away in the course of manufacturing the Anthropocene. Even as we have physically insinuated our species into every corner of the planet, we have paradoxically walled ourselves off from nature in our ideas and attitudes. For the sake of our species, and for that of all the other beings with whom we share this planet, we can no longer afford to erect such walls.