"Nature, after all, is the consummate people-pleaser—it is serviceable to anyone who wants to speak in its name [...] Nature cannot speak for itself, but everyone else is all too willing to do the job."

— Andrew Ross in conversation with Mark Dion, 1996
Introduction

"The unnatural, that too is natural"
— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

At every technological juncture in history, from the Stone Age through the Industrial Revolution and right up to the iPad 3, nature has had a complex interplay with the so-called "unnatural," or the artificial. As Goethe once commented, "the unnatural, that too is natural." UNNATURAL is an exhibition presented at the Bass Museum of Art from September through November 2012 that explores the role of nature in the age of technology. Mostly comprising video, but also including sculpture and installation, the works in this exhibition, as stated by the curator, "reflect the freedom of the imagination and the wonders of simulation technology, which make the inconceivable conceivable."

There is a dense art historical map tracing the dynamic between art, technology and life. Mostly beginning, for obvious reasons, after the late 1800s, artists have reflected upon, criticized and also exalted virtues of technological evolution. Futurist artist Umberto Boccioni's sculpture Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, 1913, for example, celebrated the industrial revolution; while, Yves Klein's famous photograph Leap into the Void of 1960 was a photomontage denouncing NASA's lunar exploration. One must point, however, to the special case of Nam June Paik, who has been credited by some with the original usage (1974) of the term "super highway" when referring to telecommunications. In fact, in a Rockefeller Foundation proposal he presented in that same year, 'Media Planning for the Postindustrial Society – The 21st Century is now only 26 years away,' he used the term 'electronic super highway' and described the following: "The building of new electronic super highways will become an even huger enterprise. Assuming we connect New York with Los Angeles by means of an electronic telecommunication network that operates in strong transmission ranges, as well as with continental satellites, wave guides, bundled coaxial cable, and later also via laser beam fiber optics: the expenditure would be about the same as for a Moon landing, except that the benefits in term of by-products would be greater." In 1974 this was but a dream that some may have called "unnatural."

Recently, some science museums have recognized the importance of the artist’s voice as part of a larger scientific conversation. In 2011, the Natural History Museum in Vienna included visual artists in Synth-ethic: Art and Synthetic Biology, an exhibition about the borderline between the natural and unnatural – specifically regarding ethics and biology. This summer, Mark Dion presented a solo exhibition called Oceannonania at the Oceanographic Museum in Monaco, centered on the interest and fascination surrounding the seas. The Bass Museum is honored to enable artists to continue this dialogue in the exhibition UNNATURAL and this accompanying publication.

All exhibitions are a result of enormous teamwork of generous and talented individuals who I would like to thank profusely: first, the artists, who continually problematize our thoughts and inspire us to be smarter. I would like to thank the curator, Tami Katz-Freiman, for such an absolutely beautiful, while deeply intelligent exhibition and for her dedication to making it happen.
I would like to express our deepest appreciation to the funders of this exhibition for their generosity and trust. We are eternally grateful to Vivian Ostrovsky of the Ostrovsky Family Fund, whose support enabled the Bass Museum to confirm this exhibition early enough to allow for proper scholarship. I would like to thank the following people who offered their support when this project was only a dream: Anat Gilead, Consul for Cultural Affairs in the USA, and Rafael Gamzou, Head of the Division for Cultural and Scientific Affairs, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Revital Malca, Deputy Consul General and Ariel Roman-Harris, Director of Media and Cultural Affairs, of the Consulate General of Israel to Florida and Puerto Rico. Special thanks are due as well to Rivka Saker and Chen Tamir from Artis Contemporary Israeli Art Fund; and to Raquel and Aryeh Rubin from Targum Shlishi for their support of this exhibition.

Many people worked very hard before the opening day and they should be acknowledged: the Bass Museum of Art staff, especially Chelsea Guerdat and Jan Galliardt; and Tami Katz-Freiman’s team: Carmit Blumensohn for her invaluable assistance in various aspects of the exhibition; Talya Halkin who translated the main text from Hebrew and Dafna Graif who designed the catalogue with such inspiration. Special thanks are due to Yossi Ben Shoshan for his digital assistance in planning the installation of UNNATURAL.

I hope you enjoy and learn from this exhibition as much as we have.

Thank you.

Silvia Karman Cubiñá
Executive Director and Chief Curator
Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach
For the past several hundred years, the intellectual history of Western culture has consistently defined the relationship between nature and culture as dialectic in character. Yet today, over two centuries after the appearance of the Critique of Judgment, it is difficult to imagine an experience of Romantic wonder akin to the one described by Kant. The sense of liberty embodied in the unmediated encounter with nature—the metaphysical solace of secular man—may still be experienced, even though it is becoming increasingly more rare. At present, however, it is inevitably shaped by man’s desire to control, cultivate and preserve nature, for even the most remote stretch of wilderness—the frontier—is today managed, mediated, and domesticated. Indeed, it seems that the desire to preserve a sphere that contains no marks of human presence embodies the promise of finding refuge from culture—that is, the promise of happiness.

Nature has always inspired artistic creation, while simultaneously reflecting changing human attitudes towards it—ranging from mystical, Romantic approaches to ecological art and earth art. Nature has been viewed as a metaphor for chaotic, uncontrollable forces, as a utopian realm, and as the site of an encounter with sublime and majestic forces that provoke astonishment and awe. It has represented a mysterious symbol, an object of longing that bespeaks the basic desire to return to an Edenic past. Nature seems to embody all of man’s dreams, as well as his worst nightmares. Yet the idea of an artistic excursion to encounter the real landscape has long lost its power. In the contemporary age of the simulacra, images of nature are recycled as part of a virtual inventory containing countless manipulated and reconstructed images, so that it is no longer possible to distinguish between the real and its representation. The infinite power of nature, which Kant refers to as the “sublime,” is currently mediated through images, films and television programs, while the sense of wonder we may still experience is based on an accumulation of countless previously processed and consumed images.

Contemporary theoretical approaches go even further, arguing that the framing and circumscribing of “nature” as a “landscape” is accompanied by a shift from nature, in itself, to a perceptual schema that is implicitly shaped by cultural constructions and conventions, which are either replicated or contested by the work of art. In other words, even when contemporary landscape imagery has a concrete referent in reality, it is nevertheless constructed as an imagined sphere, already existing as a representation before it is re-presented by the artwork.

The complex relations between nature and culture are aptly defined by Jeffrey Kestner in the introduction to the recently published anthology Nature:

“Nature has repeatedly been rejected and reclaimed by artists over the last half century. Art that is engaged with it—informed by philosophical and political trends, by scientific advances
and by the evolution of theoretical frameworks within the field of visual culture – has been uniquely positioned to benefit from the dislocation of disciplinary specificities. As forms of technology have made our interventions into natural systems both increasingly refined and profound, and advances in biological and communication technology have altered the way we ‘present’ ourselves, so too have artistic re-presentations of nature evolved.”

In the hyper-technological age, the concept of nature has thus acquired a new relevance that has led many artists to reflect on artificial environments, where one is unable to distinguish between what is real and what is not. A significant number of contemporary artists challenge the gap between traditional perceptions of “nature” and “culture,” suggesting that this reductive dichotomy is no longer sustainable. In many cases, they introduce new understandings of the sublime that replace its Romantic associations and the related sense of awe with a diverse range of critical, political, and poetic approaches.

One cannot imagine a more appropriate venue for this exhibition than Miami – which was built as a consequence of the large-scale draining of swamps into artificial lakes and canals. As a city in which nature has been processed to extraordinary degrees of synthetic cultivation, it is a site where the gap between the natural and the artificial has been completely blurred. Indeed, Miami may serve as a powerful parable for the unnatural. The palm trees on the golden ocean front, the hibiscus flowers, the mangrove roots and the pastel palette of the Art Deco buildings may be thought of as a glamorous façade, a stage set centered on simulating an experience of paradise on earth. The presentation of UNNATURAL in Miami Beach – a subtropical, botanically lush barrier island that was built on a filled coral reef, and where even the beach sand was artificially imported – further strengthens the tangible relationship between the “natural” and the “unnatural.”

The artists selected for UNNATURAL come from diverse cultural backgrounds and work in a wide range of media including video, photography, sculpture and installation. These artists seem to be stretching the limits of time and place, while collecting and assembling imagery from different sources to create a new artificial form of nature. As previously mentioned, their sources of inspiration are not to be found in nature itself, but rather in mediated, cultivated natural environments – landscapes that have already been experienced, conquered, fixed, or classified. All of the landscapes featured in the exhibition may be described as imaginary ones. Some are based on concrete expanses of nature, while others are dreamlike, surreal constructions.

A thematic examination of the exhibition reveals a heterogeneous range of images: trees and forests, fields and flowers, animals, various terrains, hills and swamps, and stretches of sky containing clouds, tornadoes, or supernovas. The mediation of these images, however, involves various types of manual or digital manipulation – acts of camouflage, the use of synthetic substitutes, and the creation of simulated environments, which shed ironic light on the relations between man, nature and culture.

The contemporary discourse on nature is interdisciplinary and undermines traditional divisions between different fields of knowledge: studies in areas such as environmental ecology, eco-activism, biotechnology, biomedia, botany and zoology, experimental geography and anthropology, alongside concepts such as extinction, biodiversity, and utopianism, have thus become an integral part of this artistic discourse.

The majority of the artists in this show are Israeli-born – a fact that infuses their examination of nature with a political charge, while leading to a critical engagement with the concepts of territory and landscape. In the contemporary Israeli context, it is impossible to disassociate the landscape from its political resonances and from the multiple narratives that surround it. Landscape imagery and representations of nature in contemporary Israeli art are rarely ideologically innocent, and are certainly not Romantic. They are scorched by the fire of conflict and marked by the fervor of internal controversy. This context, where territory itself and the ownership over it are the source of a fundamental debate, clearly reveals how every act of representing nature is inevitably political and suffused with ideology.

The seductive power of natural beauty is given expression in the exhibition through images of flowers, forests and vegetation. A number of the participating artists engage with the long artistic tradition of representing flowers, and especially with the tradition of vanitas paintings, in which the beauty of flowers symbolizes the fragility and ephemerality of human life. Einat Arif-Galanti uses plastic flowers “planted” on a bed of Astroturf to create a video-animation cycle of blooming and withering that resembles a still-life painting come to life. By contrast, Michal Shamir collects vestiges of real nature, which she carefully dries and scans, underscoring processes of withering, disintegration, and decay. Jennifer Steinkamp presents cascades of flowers that sway lightly in the wind like an architectural backdrop, a monumental stretch
of wallpaper projected onto the museum’s grand ramp wall. Gal Weinstein, meanwhile, “draws” pine forests by laboriously gluing steel wool onto wooden panels and then setting them on fire.

Representations of flowers have a strong connection to the tradition of still-life paintings – an early genre of artificial nature. Ori Gersht’s video work introduces movement into a still-life of a pheasant and grapes by the painter Jean-Siméon Chardin. In Gersht’s video, the pheasant is seen diving downwards and collapsing into its own reflection, thus enhancing the affinity between beauty and death. In a similar manner, Dana Levy alludes to the tradition of landscape painting by using a crane to pull an ancient pine tree out of the depths of a pastoral lake.

The preoccupation with animals is related to a reflection on the uncanny and the repressed, as well as to the urge to domesticate and cultivate. In Meirav Heiman and Yossi Ben Shoshan’s work, a sperm whale imprisoned in an aquarium that is too small to accommodate its size symbolizes the enduring power of a vast and threatening nature, even when it is fully subjected by man. Hilja Kading similarly blurs the boundaries between the natural and the fictional by examining the domestication and cultivation of wildlife, while documenting her own intimate encounter with a gigantic black bear. A playful preoccupation with animals is also given expression in the enchanting experimental work by Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, who engaged live birds in a chance acoustic production, resulting in a magical sonic adventure.

Muddy terrains and swamps have special significance in this exhibition due to its location in the south of Florida. The symbolic charge of such areas is related to liminal states, to the abject, and to the mystery of a primeval, untamed, libidinal world. Blane De St. Croix presents a fragment of a muddy landscape that appears to be floating at the center of the exhibition space, and which alludes to the Everglades nature reserve in South Florida. The symbolic charge of such areas is related to liminal states, to the abject, and to the mystery of a primeval, untamed, libidinal world. Blane De St. Croix presents a fragment of a muddy landscape that appears to be floating at the center of the exhibition space, and which alludes to the Everglades nature reserve in South Florida. Gilad Ratman investigates an extreme case of the human desire to wallow in nature by documenting a bizarre activity that involves physically immersing oneself in thick, slippery mud. Yehudit Sasportas’ video is composed of a “patchwork” of images depicting European forests and swamps, which are combined with drawings of vertical lines. Spreading out among the tree trunks and invading the swampland, these lines seem to fuse the real, visible landscape with an imaginary, emotional landscape.

The infinite expanse of the sky is embodied in this exhibition in Wendy Wischer’s work, where a bright sky is reflected in puddles that seem to have formed on the museum floor. An illusory representation of the sky also appears in Guy Zagtursky’s work, where a starry night is magically revealed within a wooden crate used to transport artworks. Stunning and impossible panoramas of supernovas – stars collapsing into themselves – appear in the digital montage created by Boaz Aharonovitch, which stretches the limits of the photographic medium and undermines its association with the representation of reality.

Another thematic prism through which one may examine the works in this exhibition is their affiliation with scientific, Romantic, poetic, and ecological approaches to nature. A scientific approach is evident in Rose-Lynn Fisher’s microscopic photographs of bees, which reveal the metaphorical code embodied in the structure and surface patterns of the bees’ bodies and their resemblance to creatures in a science-fiction film. A pseudo-scientific approach is represented by the works of Uri Shapira, who concocts various materials, encourages “natural” reactions among chemicals, and creates “metal vegetation” in aquariums. Tomer Sapir similarly blurs the boundaries between animal and mineral, real and fictional, by creating laboratory mutations whose degree of “naturalness” can no longer be determined. And in Freddy Shachar Kislev’s work, the fusion of the natural and the artificial, the organic and the synthetic, is similarly embodied by the writhing mollusk floating in a pool of black liquid.

A Romantic, yet politically charged approach, is given expression in the works of Richard Mosse, who uses infrared film to transform the killing fields of Africa into a mysterious, exotic, pink-tinged terrain. A different kind of manipulated nature appears in the works of Tobias Madison, who applied expressionist paint drips to synthetic plants and inserted them into glass display cases. In doing so, he provokes ironic thoughts concerning new age trends centered on a green ecology, the preservation of nature, and the sanctification of the “natural.” A poetic approach to myths concerning nature is given expression in Sigalit Landau’s video work, which features a watermelon raft that floats in the Dead Sea, unraveling in a spiral motion around the artist’s naked body.

Photographic practices play a central role in representing nature, especially in terms of the range of manipulations they make possible. Technologies such as Photoshop, video, and scanning, alongside other digital technologies, similarly enable artists to create deceptive simulations and synthetic forms of manmade nature. Samantha Salzinger creates imaginary topographies of a mysterious and imaginary natural world, which she represents in the form of
dioramas. Boaz Aharonovitch's supernovas were created out of countless Internet-based images. The photographs of Rose-Lynn Fisher and Richard Mosse stretch the limits of the photographic medium and undermine its association with the representation of reality. Aziz+Cucher's works appear as landscapes culled from different digital sources and transformed into complete fictions. Ori Gersht's works similarly challenge the perception of photography as a tool for reporting on reality. And Meirav Heiman and Yossi Ben Shoshan's sperm whale brings to a climax the conflation of the organic and the digital, while entirely undermining the concept of the "natural." This creature, whose body is an illusion composed of pixels, is the most virtual one in the exhibition.

The works included in this exhibition all raise questions concerning the consumption of nature in the 21st century, the different manners in which man appropriates nature for his own needs, and the rarity of unmediated encounters with nature in the digital world. The painstaking artistic labor invested in creating imagined, artificial worlds offers a reflection of the human need to conquer and appropriate nature, as well as of man's helplessness when faced with uncontrollable natural disasters and other natural phenomena. At the same time, these works question conventional means and methods of representing the natural world and metaphorically embody both the paradoxical longing to merge with nature and the threat embedded in this longing. UNNATURAL also represents the far-fetched fusion of reality, fantasy and simulation. It reflects the freedom of the imagination and the wonders of simulation technology, which make the inconceivable conceivable. Last but not least, it reveals how the unmediated sense of awe and wonder provoked by nature has been replaced by the work of art, which enables us to marvel at the act of representation and to re-imagine nature, while celebrating the wonders of the human imagination.
Blane De St. Croix

Born in Boston; lives and works in Brooklyn

The representation of nature and of the natural as a perfect form of simulation is characteristic of the work of Blane De St. Croix. He is interested in getting to the root of the relentless human desire to rule the Earth, which produces ecological and political conflicts. His work may be thought of as a sculptural extension of a long tradition of landscape paintings, while putting an emphasis on conflict-torn areas and on the examination of concepts such as territory, border, circumscription, and separation. In recent years, his main body of work has been concerned with a geopolitical study of landscapes in charged locations worldwide (such as the borders between the US and Mexico, Pakistan and Afghanistan, North and South Korea, or the area surrounding the nuclear power plants in West Virginia). In some instances, his monumental sculptural installations are situated within nature, while in other cases they are displayed in exhibition spaces, creating a fluid interplay between exterior and interior.

Like a geologist, De St. Croix begins each project by undertaking a series of preparatory actions that include sampling the earth, collecting documentary photographs and satellite images, and interviewing local residents. He then integrates these elements with natural materials collected on site and synthetic, industrial materials, in order to create a small-scale replica, or diorama, of the original landscape. His work *Floating Fire* is a muddy landscape fragment that appears to be hovering at the center of the exhibition space, and which represents the Everglades reserve in South Florida. This ecologically rich area, which is the region's main source of water, symbolizes man's destructive intervention in the eco-system. It poses a serious concern for environmental activists, who point to the connection between the diminishing size of the reserve and the effects of global warming. In the 1980s the Everglades were declared a national preservation project – the largest in American history; yet this project is still threatened by a range of political and economic interests. The fragment of earth that appears in this work contains the scorched remains of plants and a pond of water. These natural vestiges seem to have been uprooted from the Sawgrass Plains in the aftermath of an ecological disaster, in order to be preserved in the museum as the last remains of a vanished world.

*Floating Fire, 2012 (detail)*