



EXHIBITION GUIDE

Fake Plastic Forest

France Dubois
Annette Isham
Işık Kaya
Leigh Merrill

**CONTEM
PORARY★**

ON VIEW

January 17, 2023– April 3, 2023

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Cover image:

Leigh Merrill, *Burned Cedar*, 2022, archival pigment print, 39 x 39 inches, courtesy of Liliana Bloch Gallery

Above:

France Dubois, *The Song of the Bear*, 2022, Archival pigment print, 16 x 24 inches, courtesy of the artist

EXHIBITION STATEMENT

Fake Plastic Forest is an exhibition featuring the work of contemporary photographers and lens-based artists dealing with themes of artifice, truth and fiction, and the theatricality of our interactions with nature. Collectively these themes relate to ideas of preservation, the transcendent practice of going into nature, and seeking representations of nature to process and release intense events and emotions such as fear and grief. Our various relationships with nature are revealing of personal and collective selves. The urgency to reflect on these relationships is ever-present as we globally contend with our impact on our environments and consider transnational identity. The artists selected can be considered in the context of numerous other female photographers throughout the history of the medium who have used their environments, both natural and human-made, as the site/studio the work is made, and as part of the subject. These artists used the context of vast landscape, forests, and trees as site and rooting subjects to pivot from and address themes such as psychology and mysticism.

Dim Descension III by Annette Isham is an immersive video where the viewer floats down into a lush, green forest, following behind female figures whose large hooped skirts undulate as they float down the path. The figures multiply and divide—multidimensional beings who inhabit a multidimensional landscape—with their black and white, geometric attire contrasting which the natural landscape. The contrast creates uncertainty about the belonging of the figures, yet their purposeful movements as the viewer's guide through this forest points to the viewer being the outsider in this science fiction-like scene.

France Dubois' The Song of the Bear builds on the artists fear of losing a close elderly friend, which became heightened with the pandemic. The two move tenderly in dense and dim woods, a space allowing for quiet reflection and openness. Their performative interactions

with each other and the forest express how with closeness another person can become a part of who you are.

Leigh Merrill's large-scale digital collages of Collecting Forests exist in a space of between fiction and reality. The viewer is drawn into the rich, diorama-esque photographs, but confronted with interruptions to the natural landscape, such as a bird suspended by string or wallpaper. The coexistence of real and fabricated depictions of nature is a critical reflection on human impact on the environment. The dissonance also considers how humans interpretations and replications of nature do not hold the same comfort and purpose as the real ones our species continues to endanger space - vital landscapes for our physical, mental, and emotional well-beings.

Moving more firmly into a realm of the fabricated environment, Işık Kaya's Second Nature indexes cell phone tower trees in southern California, à la Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher's water towers. These also become anonymous sculptures, both in the photographs and as Kaya brings cell tower leaf abscissions (sheddings) into the gallery as specimens. These tree-like cell towers populating cities and rural landscapes, attempting to camouflage into the environment, only enunciates their incongruity and points to the impacts our technology has on the landscape on a mass scale.

In Fake Plastic Forest the two types of performing with nature draw a spectrum of critique and understanding. Where physical bodies are present and performing in nature there is a processing and accessing of the inner-self in contrast to our natural world, and as France Dubois puts it, "In the forest, I connect to the invisible, to the universe's secrets." Conversely, depictions where nature itself is performed, through fabricated versions of it, such as the presence of a cell tower, there is an attempt in hiding uncomfortable truths. But the work argues these objects coexisting with realness results in the breaking down of artifice.

- Jacqueline Saragoza McGilvray,
Curator and Exhibitions Manager

Fake Plastic Forest

IMAGE LABELS AND DESCRIPTIONS

Clockwise from the gallery entrance

1) Işık Kaya, Monopal Frond #1, 2020, Cell tower branch abscissions found object, 107" x 1", Courtesy of the artist

2) Işık Kaya, SN. 8, 2022, Archival pigment print, 26" x 18", Courtesy of the artist

3) Top left: Işık Kaya, SN.33 and SN.40, 2022, Archival pigment print, 20" x 15", Courtesy of the artist

4) Top right: Işık Kaya, SN.34 and SN.19, 2022, Archival pigment print, 20" x 15", Courtesy of the artist

5) Bottom left: Işık Kaya, SN.15 and SN.32, 2022, Archival pigment print, 20" x 15", Courtesy of the artist

6) Bottom right: Işık Kaya, SN.16 and SN.25, 2022, Archival pigment print, 20" x 15", Courtesy of the artist

7) Işık Kaya, SN. 5, 2022, Archival pigment print, 30 x 25" each, Courtesy of the artist

8) Işık Kaya, Monopine Needles, 2021/2021, Cell tower leaf abscissions found objects

9-16) France Dubois, The Song of the Bear, 2022, Archival pigment print, 12" 8" and 16" x 24", Courtesy of the artist

10) Annette Isham, Dim Descension III, 2021, Video, 6:05mins, Courtesy of the artist

- 11) Leigh Merrill, Forest Diorama, 2022, Archival pigment print, Digitally collaged photograph, 39" x 78", 2 panels 39" x 39", Courtesy of the Liliana Bloch Gallery
- 12) Leigh Merrill, Burned Cedar, 2022, Archival pigment print, Digitally collaged photograph, 39" x 39", Courtesy of the Liliana Bloch Gallery
- 13) Leigh Merrill, Forest (east - west), 2022, Archival pigment print, Digitally collaged photograph, 39" x 39", Courtesy of the Liliana Bloch Gallery
- 14) Leigh Merrill, Forest Set (Pines), 2021, Archival pigment print, Digitally collaged photograph, 39"x 49", Courtesy of the Liliana Bloch Gallery
- 15)Annette Isham, Night Roses, 2023, Video, 4:51, Courtesy of the artist

ARTIST STATEMENT

The Song of the Bear

“I love the snow on my friend’s hair. I want to look like her. She breathes life into me. I’m afraid of losing her. Sometimes, I dream there’s a black and white tornado in my belly. The sea churns in my head, I sleep badly.

“In the forest, I connect to the invisible, to the universe’s secrets. I feel no pain now. It’s as though I’m inhabited by a wild spirit. Between dog and wolf, the time of mysteries. On the brink of the invisible. Moments where different worlds coincide.

“I whisper with the spirits of the woods. Time becomes circular. I am she, she is I and we are the forest. I feel strong, inhabited by multiple lives. We complete a ritual that exists since the dawn of time. It is our secret. We are specks of dust, trees, blood, and rain.

I am no longer sad, for I write a tale on eternity.”

This work was released during winter 2020-21. One of my best friends is 77 years old and due to the pandemic we all experienced, I was afraid to lose her. I wanted her to be eternal. This work is about hope, solidarity amongst friends and our connection to nature.



France Dubois. Image courtesy of the artist.

BIOGRAPHY

France Dubois unrelentingly explores spaces of intimacy; there is a small almost transparent border between dreams and reality, the visible and invisible, which stretches like a taut thread between the two universes, where it takes little for individuals to cross to the other side, into different worlds.

The photographer uses images of the vacillations in our lives to show our capacity to move from one state to the other. Taking subjects like adolescence, relationships with other people, absence, history, or sickness, she explores our ability to overcome our weaknesses and emerge stronger from them, like a continual new beginning. Passing is gentler surrounded by light, sickness becomes a work of art, melancholy transforms itself into pure energy, and the driver of creativity.

France Dubois' strength lies in her minimalist photographic style which has a powerful aesthetic appeal. The characters in her photographs appear fused with their environment, as if nature has given them the strength to overcome these moments of self-doubt, to reengage, draw on nature, and regenerate, as symbols of rebirth. The universal history she weaves from her own, almost shameless standpoint, make her photographs an accurate and poetic reflection of our own inner lives.

Her work has been shown in Belgium (Recylart, Médiatine, Bozar, Hangar Photo Art Center) and at: New York Photo Festival, Kaunas Photo Festival (Lithuania), Galerie VU' (Paris), Itinéraires des Photographes Voyageurs (Bordeaux, France), Les Photautumnales (Beauvais, France), Les Transphotographiques (Lille, France), AIAV (Yamaguchi, Japan), Photo Art Fair (London, UK), and Fotofabrik BNL-Bxl (Berlin, Germany).

ANNETTE ISHAM

ARTIST STATEMENT

My work explores the dynamics of gender, race, and geography through creating animated landscapes, layering moments of fantasy, failure, obstacle, and disruption. My process enjoys the absurd and inserts moments of narrative in a collaged sublime. In the series Dim Descension a cascade of repeating female figures meld into each other in a dense green forest. The figures multiply and divide and lead the viewer down a multi-dimensional inhabitation.



Annette Isham, still, Dim Descension III, 2021, video, 6 minutes.

BIOGRAPHY

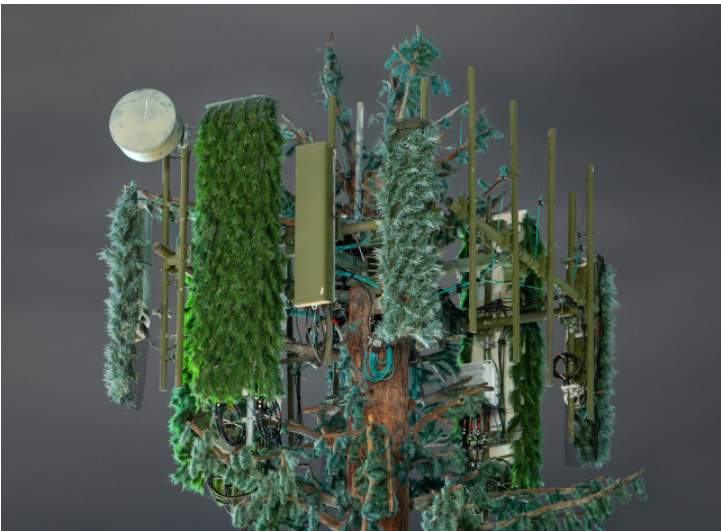
Annette Isham is an artist, professor, and filmmaker currently living in Denver, Colorado. Isham received her MFA. from The American University in Washington, DC and currently teaches 4D and Animation at Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design. Isham has exhibited nationally, including Choreography for an Unfamiliar Here at Trestle Gallery in Brooklyn, NY. Isham was the recipient of the 3x3 grant and created A Space To Hold, in collaboration with The Yard in Colorado Spring, CO. Most recently she has concluded a residency at PlatteFourm in Denver where she exhibited a new body of work, Imitation Simulation.



Annette Isham. Image courtesy of the artist.

ARTIST STATEMENT

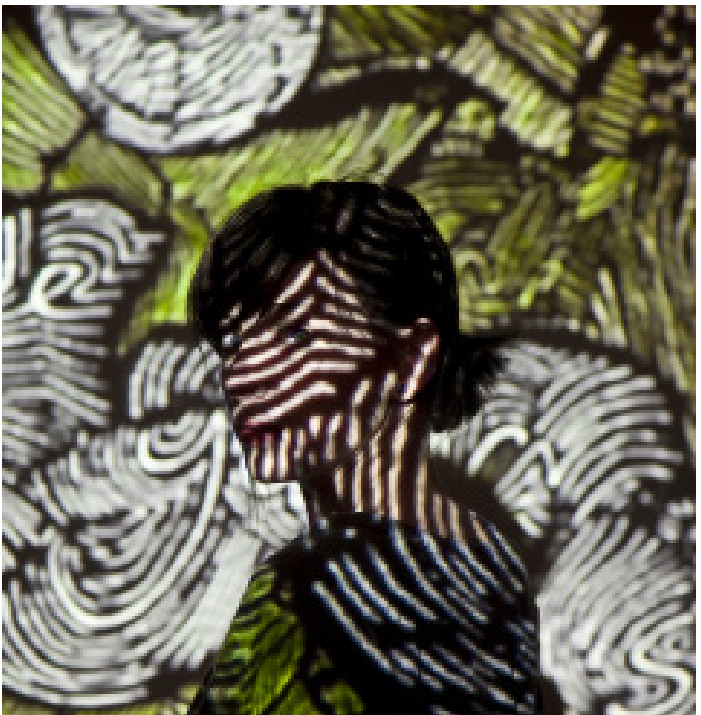
With the uprise of mobile devices, the infrastructural needs of the telecommunication industry have exploded, and since the 1980s, cell towers have started to fill the planet. The scenery changed dramatically when an antenna was transformed into an artificial pine tree for the first time in 1992. Since then, this kind of camouflage has evolved into a global phenomenon that raises fundamental questions about the relationship between humans and nature. The images from the series *Second Nature* focus on cell tower trees that became part of the Southern California landscape. The series depicts these artefacts of the digital age as, in Amy Clarke's words, a "societal preference for 'fake' aesthetics over 'ugly' reality."



Işık Kaya, *Second Nature*, SN .2, 2022, Archival pigment print, 20.3" x 30.3" x 1.35"

BIOGRAPHY

Işık Kaya is a lens-based media artist whose practice explores the ways in which humans shape the landscape. She focuses on traces of economic infrastructures to examine politics in built environments and how humanity's dominance over nature finds its manifestation in everyday architecture. By framing her subjects exclusively at night, she aims to accentuate the artificial and uncanny qualities of urban environments. Işık Kaya holds an MFA degree in Visual Arts from the University of California, San Diego, and a BA degree in Photography and Videography from Istanbul Bilgi University, where she studied with a full scholarship. She has participated in exhibitions at Kunsthalle Basel (CH), Athens Photo Festival (GR), PhEST (IT), Kunsthalle Darmstadt (DE), Royal Geographic Society (UK), CEAAC (FR), Lishiu Art Museum (CHN), CICA Museum (KR), and San Diego Art Institute – ICA San Diego (USA) among others.



Işık Kaya. Image courtesy of the artist.

ARTIST STATEMENT

Collecting Forests is a series of large-scale digital collages exploring the construction, idealization, and loss of our environments through images of the forest. Responding to our current era where the entirety of our world is affected by humans, Merrill considers how our ideas, values, curiosity, fears, destruction, and expectations are projected into our increasingly endangered forests.

Merrill's images are neither real nor absolute fiction; they point to a complicated relationship to the environment, a combination of what exists and what is desired. The images, poetically situated between reality and simulation, depict forests as dioramas, theatre sets, and wallpaper. These images become a metaphor for forest loss and the faint replicas that remain of these landscapes. The images Merrill creates are views from within a forest, presenting specific but not landmark locations, contrary to a distant, expansive, and authoritative view of the landscape. Each picture is created by digitally collaging hundreds of individual photographs made in forests across the United States. The collection of plants and trees in each image is improbable - a form of digital assisted migration - signaling possibility, connection, and loss.

BIOGRAPHY

Leigh Merrill is an American artist born in 1978. Working primarily with photography, Merrill creates digitally collaged photographic and video works that explore our contemporary landscapes and the impact of desire, simulation, and perception on the built environment. Merrill received her BFA from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, NM and her MFA from Mills College in Oakland, CA.

Merrill's work has been a part of exhibitions throughout the United States and abroad in venues such as the Phoenix Art Museum, the diRosa Art Preserve, The Lawndale Art Center, FotoFest International, the Fries Museum (Netherlands) and the Museum of Texas Tech University. Merrill's work has been included in online and print publications such as the Washington Post, Afterimage Magazine, Places Journal, the Dallas Morning News, and the Houston Chronicle.

Her work is part of the permanent collections of the Museum of Texas Tech University, the University of North Texas Library Print Study Collection, the City of Phoenix, the California Institute of Integral Studies, and various private collections.

Leigh Merrill lives and works in Dallas, TX, where she is an Associate Professor of Art at Texas A&M University-Commerce.



Leigh Merrill. Image courtesy of the artist.



A LETTER FROM CONTEMPORARY'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Hello friends, fans, and family,

As a home for artists and their work, we are committed to supporting their boldness to take risks and providing a platform for challenging ideas, along with a range of programs that encourage exploratory, critical, and creative thinking.

Contemporary art is full of complex themes and we present exhibitions with artists from San Antonio and around the world who share global perspectives that encourage understanding and empathy, fulfilling our mission to inspire, nurture, and innovate.

Please consider investing in our shared creative community of students, artists, educators, art aficionados, and visitors who engage with our dynamic programs, and make a donation today.

We hope to see you often at Contemporary at Blue Star!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mary Heathcott". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a stylized "H" at the end.

Mary Heathcott
Executive Director
Contemporary at Blue Star

SPECIAL THANKS

Contemporary is grateful for its community of funders who help us realize our exhibitions and education programs, including:

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We also thank our collaborators in producing Fake Plastic Forest at TXST, the photography department at the School of Art and Design.



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ALL BY NURTURING ARTISTS THROUGH
INNOVATIVE CONTEMPORARY ART*

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Since our debut in 1986, the very fibers of Contemporary's rich cultural tapestry are supporting artists and nurturing our community's relationships with them. Today, more than 18 million people engage with Contemporary each year, onsite in our galleries, in community outreach events, and through public art projects.

WE INSPIRE with daily in-school and out-of-school programs such as Creative Classrooms, which improves attendance rates and students' long-term success in school, and our MOSAIC Student Artist Program, an immersive studio and "business of art" practicum that nurtures future artistic talent and gives a safe, productive space for learning and self-expression.

WE NURTURE by providing unparalleled opportunities for our artist community with residencies in Berlin, Germany, and a commitment to the fair and equal payment of artists as a W.A.G.E.-certified nonprofit, stimulating our economy by valuing equally the contributions of artists with those of other professionals.

WE INNOVATE through our exhibitions, with fun, interactive Family Saturdays, Artist Workshops, Art Field Trips, Artist Talks, Art Walks, and community outreach partnerships.

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We care about YOU. Our community's safety remains our top priority, and we have signed the Greater. SAfer. Together Pledge. Our COVID guidelines such as mask wearing and temperature checks reflect city recommendations and are responsive to current available data. Thank you for your patience and understanding as we navigate this together.

