

Against Nature

In *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature Politics, Desire*, interdisciplinary scholars Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson argue that the mainstream categorizes queerness as fundamentally against nature. Queer ecology, then, offers an alternative; it argues for cooperation (rather than competition) between species offers a successful model for the future.

I first connected with this through what Mortimer-Sandilands describes as “melancholy nature,” the connection between queer mourning and environmental mourning. As an art historian with a background in art of the AIDS crisis, I have been profoundly moved by nature’s role in healing both individual and collective trauma.

Derek Jarman’s brilliant *Modern Nature* serves as perhaps the ultimate testament to melancholy nature. Following his HIV diagnosis in 1986, the multimedia artist and filmmaker relocated to a remote cottage on the English seaside. Through his emotionally charged journals, Jarman draws connections between his anger over the loss of his friends—over the loss of himself—and the rapid decomposition of his surrounding environment. Care necessitates care.

Inspired by queer theory’s power to offer radical solutions for our turbulent times, the artists in *Against Nature* shift their focus to close, intimate, prolonged relationships between organisms. They follow José Esteban Muñoz’s utopian call for a “theory of queer futurity that is attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing a present.”

Dennis Doyle’s (they/them) practice expertly shifts between these temporalities. Describing *To swallow a fly*, they note that “here I question not what deserves to live, but what deserves to be acknowledged in death, seeking to create a new ethic of care for that which is usually discarded.” *Transatmosphorics: Test 2: Slash Burn* expands upon these themes, incorporating scent and asking us to carefully consider the exchanges and interactions between bodies at a molecular level.

As a queer phenomenologist and creative geographer, Eden Kinkaid (they/them) is driven by a curiosity around space and embodiment. Kinkaid’s work disrupts the normative traditions of the natural history museum and the visual landscape, reimagining them as sites of queer utopia. *natural history* and *queer landscape* blend a variety of techniques to bridge time periods and create spaces where freedom rests on the horizon.

Ephemera lies at the center of Ginger Brooks Takahashi’s (she/they) work. Her immersive performances and installations present calls for public action, as seen in *What causes one to break their silence?*, a sculptural recreation of a previous performance woven together from air quality reports, social media comments, and their own lived experiences. Brooks Takahashi’s submission from the *Queer Ecology Hanky Project*, an ongoing project led by V Adams and Mary Tremonte, demonstrates how her ideas have impacted the emerging field of queer ecology.

Corinne Teed’s (they/them) *Feral Utopias* references Mortimer-Sandilands’s notion of melancholy nature, turning sites of mourning into sites of empowerment for marginalized voices. Digitally collaging together studio recordings of LGBTQ subjects and scans of 19th-century wood engravings carved by colonial naturalists, *Feral Utopias* presents a speculative world rooted in

survival. *The Burrows*, on the other hand, takes a new approach to visualizing cross-species intimacy: it “situates contemporary queer portraiture within a utopic, multispecies community through the imagined co-habitation of another species’ dwelling – we also sense a dystopia of being trapped and isolated from each other.”

Denver’s own Frankie Toan (they/them) has been expanding upon their *Queer Gardens* series since 2019, describing the immersive installations as “fantasy landscapes where radical notions of queerness can merge with the ecosystem, challenging notions of ‘family’, ‘self’ and even ‘garden.’” The latest iteration, *Queer Gardens: Undergrowth*, commissioned for *Against Nature*, turns its focus to areas where transmutation and decomposition take place. Using scale to de-emphasize the human traces in the garden, other (nonhuman) agendas play out.

In the variety of work presented here, you might draw parallels to themes and visuals found in the sci-fi universes of Octavia Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Samuel R. Delany. Importantly, these artists demonstrate that these thoughts don’t have to be relegated to sci-fi; in fact, they’re already very much a part of our reality.

Welcome. Step in, explore, and lose—or find—yourself in the garden that is *Against Nature*. Suspend your sense of disbelief. The future is queer.

— Shawn C. Simmons