



CROSS- POLLINATED

Hybrid Art Abuzz

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**Center for the Arts Gallery,
Towson University**

cross-pol·li·na·tion

Pronunciation: (krô's'pol"u-nà'shun, kros'-) n

1. Bot. the transfer of pollen from the flower of one plant to the flower of a plant having a different genetic constitution. Cf. **self-pollination**.
2. A sharing or interchange of knowledge, ideas, etc., as for mutual enrichment; cross-fertilization.

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Using a metaphor borrowed from botany, we call the work in this show cross-pollinated. This exhibition brings together contemporary artists whose work is enriched and informed by an exchange of knowledge to create new forms. The emphasis here is on animated, digital, and kinetic work linked to processes found in the natural world. Ideas from one field germinate and take root in another. Interdisciplinary artists fly between a

variety of media, and boundaries break down. The artists featured are agents of change, often carrying seeds of inspiration from one art form to another and from the field of science to that of the visual arts, or vice versa. Cross-pollination is not only integral to the creative process; it is also often the literal subject matter. The art captures pollinators: bees, flies, moths, insects, birds, wind—or the pollinated: plants, trees, vines, and flowers.

The work in this gallery is alive. It vibrates. It's hairy. It's wiry. It wiggles. It makes funny noises. It fans you as it flips. You have to peek and peer to see what's there.

Many of the artists included in this show work as animators and this sensibility enlivens the gallery. Recently animation has begun to pervade gallery spaces, leaving the screening room and the limits of the film frame. Expanded animation is not new: a rich interdisciplinary history of experimental animation connects with dance, performance, kinetic sculpture, collage, and abstract painting. Animation, broadly defined as breathing life into things, appeals in this time of environmental threat and looming extinctions. The work in this show provokes recognition of the “animacy,” or “aliveness” of animals, plants, machines, and inanimate beings, or the aliveness of the artwork itself. Derived from linguistics the word animacy serves in grammar as a way to rank words on the basis of perceived aliveness, and encompasses notions of anthropomorphism, agency, expressivity, sentience, cognizance, and mobility. Every time an artwork stimulates the feeling of the uncanny, or empathy, or recognition, it is because the artists are toying with our sense of animacy.

Just as hybrid plants display new features and different characteristics from their parents, becoming something altogether new, several artists included in this show take processes derived from math, science, or engineering and apply them to their work in order to innovate. Conversely the sciences sometimes look toward the arts for new ideas about playful and effective experimentation. Working together, artists and scientists collaborate across fields of inquiry and experience new ways of thinking. Some the pieces in this show are explicitly interspecies collaborations, humans working with non-human creatures as creative collaborators.

In the *IndaPlant Project, An Act of Trans-Species Giving*, the artist **Elizabeth Demaray** and her collaborators **Ahmed Elgammal**, **Qingze Zou** and **Simeon Kotchoni** at Rutgers University in Camden,

NJ, are designing assistive technology to allow plants to find their own water and light. They are building robotic platforms that enable plants to roam freely of their own accord indoors, in order to fulfill their needs. We think of plants as having less animacy than animals, in part because they don't move (at least not ambulating as most animals do). But, of course, plants do turn to face the light, they grow, they drop their leaves. *The IndaPlant Project* allows plants to act on their desires. Enabling plants to have mobility and autonomy has both metaphoric and scientific value. Like many of Demaray's projects, it is absurd, yet completely practical, with real-world possibilities and objectives. Another interspecies project is based at **Patuxent Wildlife Research Center** in Laurel, Maryland, where baby whooping cranes are raised by white-costumed human volunteers using crane puppets to teach chicks to forage, while avoiding human imprinting. Later, the chicks learn to follow these surrogate parents flying ultralight aircraft that will lead the young whoopers on their first migration. Craig Saper documented the chick training on video for the *Cross-Pollinated* show. Watching this performance is bizarre, like a surrealist skit, because its rules are not designed for human benefit: it is a “puppet show for the birds.”

In Montreal, animator/artist/media historian **Alison Reiko Loader** collaborated with entomologist **Christopher Plenzich**, and his research subjects, *Malacosoma disstria* (forest tent caterpillars). In *Caterpillar Choreography*, the humans drew pheromone trails for the caterpillars to follow. The larval creatures crawled along in sequence, tracing a curving path. Sometimes a rogue caterpillar might venture off the trail, laying down their own scent lines for their siblings to follow, creating a shared choreographed line-dance. The video of the choreographed caterpillars is projected on screens created from hand-stretched silk from silkworm cocoons, as silkworms are close cousins of forest tent caterpillars. With her background in animation, Loader considered the long history of moth and insect bodies in animation, from Ladislav Starevich's use of beetle carapaces in his stop-motion films

like *The Cameraman's Revenge* (1912), to Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963). The making of *Caterpillar Choreography* suggests the process of computer animation, where an artist creates a path or a curve and sets particles or objects to move along it; and like a generative program it allows for a degree of randomness and surprise.

Other artists in the show use generative art processes and digital manipulation to explore or reveal patterns and design in nature. The artist sets the parameters, makes choices, and reveals what is hidden through digital processes and technologies. **Dennis Hlynsky** digitally processes video to reveal movement patterns of insects, birds, and fish. The movement of fruit flies on the surfaces of peaches, apples, and grapes in a bowl of fruit draws a still life; birds' paths in the air are revealed as calligraphic flourishes; super slow-motion video reveals the voluptuous sensuousness of a bumblebee's caress of its desired blossom. **Nicky Assmann's** *Human Swarm*, documentation of a performance, along with a script for reenacting the performance, references computer scientist Craig Reynold's famous computer model "boids" that used simple commands to create a simulation of flocking or schooling behavior. Using this swarming algorithm Assmann choreographed a performance of human actors wearing masks that limit their perspective, so that they move in a randomized but predictable swarm.

Brandon Morse's code-based work uses generative processes to create organic 3D animated moving forms, with stripped-down color and minimal distraction. *Splitting Hairs*, a revolving shaggy ciliated mass split down the middle, exemplifies how Morse's mathematical code creates a tactile physicality on screen. We can't touch it, but we still imagine how it feels. **Douglas Hudson** is another animator and animation professor. His video, *Floating Leaf Meditation*, is not an animation, but a close study of movement in nature: a found moment of beauty to contemplate, a leaf mid-air on a beautiful autumn day, floating in place, levitating as if by magic, caught in a spider web. Animating a falling leaf is a common

introductory movement exercise for many animation students and at first Hudson thought this video would be just a reference study. But on watching the video play back, he realized it was already complete, there was "simply nothing to be added...the film was finished before it began and serves its purpose as meditative experience," he said. The leaf, as it turns in the quiet forest light, sculpts space. The sense of touch—or in the gallery, where touch is often forbidden, the imagined sense of touch—is created through the physical impact of this work.

Through motion detectors that turn on fans, the presence of gallery visitors directly impacts the movement of *Current Recorder*, **Billy Friebele's** wind-powered drawing machine. Built from a shopping cart, wind turbine, and other spare parts, this thoughtfully slap-dash assemblage draws circles with markers, always making different marks, depending on the whims of chance. By capturing wind's force in a drawing, the machine points to the capricious agency of breezes and gusts of air. **Monteith McCollum** works in experimental documentary film, animation, sound, and sculpture, creating connections between different media. His two sculptural pieces, *Din Din* and *Resonance of an Indeterminate Landscape*, are imaginatively decrepit machines combining cranky obsolete technology with nano-projections of poetic video on weathered glass surfaces. They are imaginary machines showing ghostly images and recall the shared history of séances and film, the otherworldly projections and spectacles that populated pre-cinematic experimentation. McCollum's pieces also explore the importance of both tactility and sound as a vibrating sculptural element in the gallery.

Juan Fontanive's flip-book machine, *Ornithology P*, also emits a whirring buzz and shows a similar interest in proto-cinematic devices. Made from clock and bike parts, the petite machine plays a constantly looping animation, creating an uncanny effect: a bird-machine hybrid. The pages fan you as you watch the hummingbird pictures zip by; you can feel the process of flipping that animates the birds. The screen-printed

images reference Audubon-like guidebooks images, changing from one species to the next in every frame, creating the illusion of motion by juxtaposing similar poses of the hovering hummers. **Ariana Gerstein** often subverts the expectations of a medium, as in her short films made using a scanner as a camera to capture sequential images. In her installation, *Cycle*, she examines the phenomena of moving image technologies, and considers film as a physical material and process. The work, created over a number of years, is made up of three elements that work together to explore the tension between movement and stillness. Boxes and frames serve as an organizing structure. Frames of film cut up are made into a backlit single image, a deconstructed animation. Holographic images are suspended, with images only revealed as the viewer moves by. A projection of the original source film completes the piece.

Like Gerstein's lightboxes, **Clarissa Gregory's** one-person dioramas also ask you to peer inside. *Habitat—a series: seascape, urbanscape, luray caverns, north american forest* includes four different views of diminutive landscapes created from a variety of materials with carefully painted background environments. Viewed through individual two-inch lenses built into the top of wooden pedestals, the dioramas become intimate, one-person artworks. Gregory calls it "a micro iteration of a natural habitat, which represents a macro ecosystem." Also included is *small growth*, a video atop a pedestal with an animated line-drawing inspired by mosses and lichens, the line crawling and unfurling on the screen surface. Gregory is a dancer and choreographer as well as a stop-motion animator and sculptor. Time, movement, and tactile materials play a part in all her work. **Allison Schulnik** also has a background in dance and works in painting and sculpture. Her clay animated films move with unusual grace and lush abandon. In *Eager*, moody gestures flow from a cast of gloomy characters: spectral figures, a downcast horse-like creature, and viscerally transforming flowers, mushrooms, and leaves, all dance in animated choreography. Made entirely by hand of simple materials like clay, wood, fabric, glue, and

wire, Schulnik's evocative stop-motion animation transcends its materials. It's a garden come to life, visceral and primordial. Like many of the works in the show, it connects us with the inner lives of non-human beings.

Cameraless animation, made by drawing or manipulating film stock directly, is the process used by two artists in the exhibit with very different outcomes. **Gina Kamentsky**, an artist who works in kinetic sculpture, comics, and animation, is drawn to time-based media. She created *Secret Bee* from a 35mm trailer for the film *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008). Using dabs of clear nail polish, she masked off certain images and areas of the film, and then bleached the rest of the film stock. Then she painted and drew on it with fine-tipped permanent pens and colorful inks. The result is a vibrantly chaotic collage of doodles, drawings, and fragments. A similar tactility but very different tone is created by **Ruth Hayes'** direct cinema film with the descriptive title *Sand Photogram with Iridescent Glitter Nail Polish*. Here, the magnified projection of the 16mm original film stock, covered with sand, exposed briefly to light, then hand-processed and dabbed with glitter nail polish, reveals tiny plastic prisms among the sand, a beautiful yet troubling reminder of the colored bits of microplastic in the ocean. *Supermoon Sand Photograms*, made from film exposed only by the light of the moon on a Pacific shore, reveals the scientific process of chemicals and traces of shadows and light. Our imagining of the artist's process of crafting the film on the moonlit beach is the poetry of the piece.

Science and speculation informs **Amy Hicks'** work, which takes an imaginative approach to historical and socio-political subjects. Hicks created *Aluminum Poof Can*, a digitally animated film that draws connections between the manufacturing process that exploits resources like aluminum, and the industrialized computer animation industry that operates like a factory, erasing the human touch from the final product. A can hangs from an alligator clip in the cold gaze of the camera. The can swells and shrinks in

time with the rhythm of recorded breaths, a metallic stand-in for human lungs, aluminum as vibrant matter. Hicks wanted to re-insert “the human presence, the breath of life...the cough, the wheeze, the snuffle in the cold.” So the can breathes, then transforms in a “poof” into a fragment of foil -- one item swapped for the other with a puff of cotton in the frame between, an old animation trick at the root of the stop-motion process. **Kelly Gallagher's** *Pen Up The Pigs* is overtly political, a work of contemporary animated agitprop, and looks like a zine on screen. It is a commentary on the legacy of police brutality and racism, particularly apt for this time and location near Baltimore, not long after the Spring 2015 uprising. Gallagher is deeply invested in handcrafted cinema, and sees the use of available, low-cost materials, like markers, glitter, paper, tape, and collage, as a revolutionary act to seize the means of production. In this film, flowers and natural images rise up whenever acts of resistance take place, a flowering of support.

Lee Boot also approaches media-making as a socio-political act. In *Brick Garden Series*, the artist uses an iterative process, painting and recording on video, layering images as he creates them, trying to make sense of the organic life of the city. It appears like a kind of game he plays, a way of synthesizing his work from other parts of his life. Like a sliding puzzle, he moves the painted square components from place to place in the digital collage to find new combinations and connections. Puzzle logic also animates **Nadav Weissman's** film *Late Excavations*. Weissman is an interdisciplinary artist who works in sculpture and painting with an animated feel, so this animated digital video works with the same elements the artist uses in his artwork to bring them to life. The film plays

on themes including home, family, and archaeology. The animated bones and teeth that sprout from the heads of the man and woman on screen are fragments that construct paths to form a schematic house, a boat of bones and a caterpillar track of teeth, stirring thoughts of relics. The piece has a flat, 2-D design that brings to mind a video game, and seems to operate according to surrealist game rules. **Bill Tomlinson** and **Rebecca Black** developed an iPad app that brings together their interests in education, biological science, computer science and animation. The two professors collaborated to create this thoughtful app that shows that educational media for children can be beautiful, effective, and scientifically sound. *Seed Cycle* combines animation with a tactile process of learning to make a colorful, interactive game for young children, where the goal is to pollinate and grow a garden, being sure to take care of all the growing plants' needs so the virtual garden can thrive.

The hybrid animate art in this show draws on various languages and processes: painting, dance, sculpture, drawing, entomology, ornithology, ecology, archaeology, computer programming, digital processing, robotics and mechanical engineering. The artworks provoke imaginative speculation and show sensitivity to the animacy of objects, animals, and non-human forces at work in the world. Most of the work in the show moves, because movement is how we understand things as alive, as animate.

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Biographies



AMY HICKS

works with a range of time-based media including film, photography, video projection and low-tech animation. She holds a BA from the University of California, Riverside and an MFA from Stanford University. Hicks lives and works in Philadelphia and is an Assistant Professor at the University of Delaware. Her piece *Aluminum Poof Can* is about the disconnect between the time it takes to watch an animation and the lived work experience of the animator: the untold hours of time clocked to make the image move. The aluminum can breathes and wheezes as it hangs in the cold studio, a metallic stand-in for the artist and her assistant. This work draws a connection with the

invisibility of labor in the production of manufactured goods with the invisibility of labor in film animation. Hicks' award-winning films and videos have screened at the Ann Arbor Film Festival; Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley; Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain Strasbourg, France; San Francisco International Film Festival; San Jose Museum of Art; and Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. Hicks has been awarded Individual Artist Grants from the San Francisco Art Commission and Film Arts Foundation among others. Her collaborative multi-faceted project with IDOK Center for Research has also toured internationally.

Amy Hicks, *Aluminum Poof Can*, digital video and audio, 2015.