

SECOND NATURE: SECOND THOUGHTS

By Tania Willard

The exhibition *Second Nature* brings together artists from different backgrounds, with disparate artwork into a curatorial conversation concerned with reading nature and the inspiration drawn from it. The exhibition asks the viewer to give pause to our current moment and our relationships with nature and the extractivist and colonial context of these relations. Second nature, by definition, can be understood as an intuition learned through practice, an iterative and repetitive way of behaving that becomes embedded and immediate through constancy. With second nature comes second thoughts, a pause to reconsider, to change, or to re-evaluate. In this exhibition we ask you to pause and reconsider relationships to nature and the natural world; what do we take for granted, what experiences, both visually and poetically, can we find within patterns of the dappling of leaves filtering light in the forest, the saturation of natural geometries or the scores upon the flesh of wild salmon as it dries?

Whether we define second thought as acting 'without a second thought' or as trepidation as in the saying 'having second thoughts' or changing our minds, 'on second thought', each phrasing indicates a pause. Pausing is a fundamental part of reading and interpreting visual art, to pause is to observe, to question and appreciate. Pausing is also a balm to the speed of our work, life and the rapidly changing world around us in an age of the instant. We can now prompt AI to write an essay in an instant, generate photographs and upload them instantly. We go live on social media and broadcast our lives in real time, and get food delivered from the comfort of our couch at the touch of a screen. In this context a pause is both a disruption and an interruption to the expectation of immediacy. Pausing to absorb the natural world around us has health benefits, the Japanese concept of forest bathing is one example. A pause becomes a nuanced subversion, an act of quiet disobedience that can restore our sense of value for nature and our present moment in a culture of instant gratification.

When we ask what has become second nature to us today we might think about our phones or laptops, the ubiquity of work being able to extend beyond 9-5 and creep into our personal lives and homes. Nature itself is distanced from the routines we have and this exacerbates human centric thinking, the devaluing of other forms of life we share the planet with and who outnumber us in terms of diversity of life. What if we took back some of our time, with the pause, a quiet tool of revolt that recontextualizes what is important, not only to us as humans but to life around us. This pausing as a way of reevaluating societal norms is something artists are often engaged with. Through the slow paced act of creative expression we are often asked, in viewing art, to reconsider colour, form, histories and current socio-political and philosophical issues. Here in the exhibition *Second Nature* we can see the attention artists like Judy Guoin pays to visual patterning as she shares this narrative of the making of *Beaver Swamp, Spring Snow II* (1977), "... from a damp, cool walk in late April, when a late snowfall had created a lace-like pattern with the many branches and twigs of drowned ceders. The light is both gloomy and promising - truly spring-like - typical of a moment of transition in the season, and in the lives and deaths of figures in this place, one that would soon be alive with the sound of mating frogs"¹ Guoin shares other moments of her inspiration from nature and patterning in her depiction of dense thickets of trees or in the representation of looking down at the ground itself as in the composition of lichen on a pile of time worn stones in *Blue Boulders* (1982-1983) and in the abstracted patterning of light between limbs in *New* (2013) which also starts to echo a natural form of camouflage.

Strategies of camouflage have many historical origins in warfare, fashion, hunting and observing nature. The razzle dazzle camouflage employed in World War 1 is particularly compelling, bold graphic disturbance patterns adorn large warships to break up their silhouette on the horizon. This is the pop art version of leaf litter camouflage but still has its origins in observing nature, we can think of zebras or other very graphic patterns on animals as precursors of the way humans adapted this strategy. In David Doody's *WAKING JAY* (2021) we might think of this form of camouflage as bold patterning that breaks up the silhouette of the anthropomorphic figures merging into a multi-headed body appearing to move in different directions but holding a flat pattern etched over its entire surface that conceals the assumed form. "A deliberate illustration of deep space and forced perspective in the otherwise super flat world of the picture plane."² Despite the painting's modernist formal qualities the artist's inspiration is from morning bird songs at his Okanagan studio. The painting took 10 months to create and was started at Eeyou Istchee, Northern Cree territory along the southeastern tip of the James Bay where the artist was invited to do a series of workshops and found the crisp air and bold colours of the land in the North and learning from this Cree community entering into his work. Doody says of the painting, "The works teetered and balanced on

an edge of contrast and contradiction, finding space between hard lines and flowing colour; oscillating between stiff patterns and the natural nuances of paint on raw canvas or paper, exploring between narrative figuration and the colour field abstraction.”³ Shipping unfinished works back home to the Okanagan, Doody worked between these natural inspirations, digital collage and pop and op art methods, working through the contrast and contradiction. In Doody’s painting, the natural is amplified into a palette of pop art patterning and anthropomorphic reference similar to Dazzle camouflage disguising and abstracting the figurative. This patterning inhibits our ability to associate common form, disarticulating foreground and background and giving us pause to interpret one from the other.

A rejection of the representational might be inferred in the geometric abstractions of Judith Schwarz’s laser cut steel and birch plywood sculptures, *Grid* and *Grid II* (1996). Inspired by conceptual minimalist artists like Sol Lewit, Schwarz’s architectural composition in the oversized substrate. Presenting an optical contrast of the work warps the vanishing line, a form of depicting linear perspective, a long lauded tool of the representational art that gives the illusion of distance as opposed to a flat plane. Disrupting this illusion of representational art, Schwarz employs an industrial form in her steel cut outs that are laid bare as a tool, a grid that underpins our perception and our expectations of the representational but asks us to consider what manipulations of reality are conjured within something like the vanishing line. Schwarz’s absorption into abstraction is a rejection of the representative and narrative in art making. In her work the abstraction of form and the rejection of artistic artifice combine to make work that is meant to shift perspective, to reveal linear perspective as only one type of perspective that can be deployed to understand our world.

Different perspectives are key to understanding and are contained not only by visual apparatus but also by cultural interpretation, when we understand cultural shifts and diverse cultural knowledges we learn new ways of relating to each other and our surroundings. In Csetkwe Fortier’s painting *3 in a Roe* (2022) we see an iconic presentation of three sides of wind dried salmon, an important food and life way for Indigenous peoples. The relationship to salmon as kin within a web of relationality is a core understanding of Interior Salish worldview. Here Fortier presents a day-glo version of wind dried salmon as an icon of Indigenous life and her void of raw linen canvas as background highlights the salmon and the beauty of its body. This body that carries the salmon through vast migrations to nurture a new generation and continue a cycle of spawning that we are just as much a part of, an antithesis to human centric thinking. Our connection to nature is embedded in many Indigenous knowledges and serves as another pause, a subversion of the perception of nature as needing to be controlled and dominated by humans. This shift in perspective allows us to honour the life around us and to value not only resources for human consumption but shift focus towards connecting to and protecting the diversity of life on Earth.

Similarly Jordan Bennett’s works *Sewn with Cotton Thread* and *A Band of Bark* (2015) draw on museum collections of the history embedded in Indigenous materiality from Mi’kmaq quill-work designs the artist researched in his MFA at UBC Okanagan. In his hand-coloured prints Bennett presents an Indigenous resurgent practice of visiting ancestor artists in museum collections to enliven the art forms, perspectives and knowledges embedded in their making. In these early works, Bennett employs pop colours and bold geometric forms as representations of Mi’kmaq aesthetics studied in his research. Offering a resurgent form of the elegant abstractions but, as silkscreen prints on paper, allows the continuation of an aesthetic derived from the land, from the logic of the use of quills in Mi’kmaq design to continue to inform us visually and culturally that the land nourishes not only life but beauty, symmetry and abstraction.

In this exhibition we have offered tools of perception, from the tools of painting like the vanishing line and gridded frameworks to the cultural viewpoints shared in specific Indigenous knowledges. To use these tools the viewer must pause, turn away from the expected path and follow along with sober second thought to reevaluate how we perceive nature at this urgent time in the age of the immediate. What experiences, visually and poetically, can we find within the patterns, visuality and interconnectedness of the natural world around us? Can we make respect for the planet and our place within it second nature instead of second thought?

¹ Gouln, Judy. Email to Tania Willard, Dec 22, 2023.

² Doody, David. Email to Tania Willard, Jan 10, 2024.

³ Ibd.