

ONEIROPHYTE

MAIN GALLERY

SEPTEMBER 21 - NOVEMBER 11, 2023



Oneirophyte, (onəiəro · fəit), a plant of dreams.
oneir-, combining form of Gr. *ὄνειρος* a dream,
and **-phyte**, a terminal element representing Gr.
φῦτόν a plant, and denoting a vegetable organism,
as *microphyte*, *protophyte*, *saprophyte*. See also
ZOOPLANT (= animal plant).

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COVER IMAGE: Helga Jakobson, *Terrarium Soundscape*, 2023. Photo courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE: *Oneirophyte* at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba. Photo: Doug Derksen, 2023.

An art installation featuring several large, dark, branching tree trunks in a gallery space. A digital screen is mounted on one of the trees, displaying a vibrant, abstract, orange and yellow pattern. Other screens and a white cube are visible in the background. The entire scene is bathed in a strong red light.

ONEIROPHYTE

Curated by Lucie Lederhendler

HELGA JAKOBSON

CASEY KOYCZAN

ERIKA JEAN LINCOLN

SYLVIA MATAS

TAYLOR MCARTHUR

SEPTEMBER 21 - NOVEMBER 11, 2023

Two prevailing anxieties of our time—concerning the consequences of global warming and artificial intelligence—are rooted in a dissonance regarding what we can and cannot control. Little can make us feel more helpless and small than extreme weather, but we contribute meaningfully when we purchase local produce or cut back on air travel. An artificially-generated likeness of a person is considered a violation when sourced without consent, but we revel in the play of colloquial conversation with chatbots. Subtextually, this also touches on the most existential of all anxieties: what is this “we”? At the best of times, it is expansive. At the worst, it’s divisive.

For fun, you might try searching “confidently incorrect” online. You’ll find threads and lists abound of folks knowing how the world works by virtue of nothing except existing in the world, as it works: the concept of down, for example, is a different concept for a tabletop globe than for the celestial globe it represents. An alarming number of these arise from simple miscategorization: ducks aren’t birds because they spend so much time swimming; bats aren’t mammals because they fly; humans aren’t animals because they have their own special word for themselves. The mistake that these individuals have made, of course, is not in their observations, but in their choice of classification systems. In their lived experience, the world is divided into flying things and water-based things; things unlike themselves and very like themselves. This is the usefulness, the scourge, and the dominance of the Linnaean taxonomic system.¹ More broadly, it underlies the Western colonial marriage of reality and fact, as evidenced first and foremost at the level of determining what is and is not alive.

In dreams, action and movement are not confined by the rules of naming and physics that we must abide in waking life—we can see around corners, decide whether our suspicions and predictions will be correct or surprise us, and understand one thing to be many things. We can do all of this without reflection, without words. The difficulty of understanding the complex lives of plants, not to mention the world we live in, might not be a difficulty at all if we could hold on to that oneiric state of mind. It is imagination, rather than intelligence, that confounds the division between one sort of life and another, because it is the kind of thinking that responds to itself, rather than to external, physical situations. This is thinking that wonders, anticipates, misremembers, interprets, opines, and cannot be rendered artificially.

¹ Named after Carl Linnaeus who published a categorization in 1735, the Linnean system uses a hierarchy from Kingdom to Species, and is where many scientific names, including *Homo sapiens*, come from.

Plants are so mundanely and obviously alive and intelligent that academic, artistic, and scientific attempts to prove so shout into the wind. One such experiment, conducted by a German lab in 1987, linked the electric impulses given off by plants to a dictionary containing 900 common words.² Since so many combinations of words can form meaning, the scientists were skeptical that what they had invented was a randomness generator, until, following a few adjustments to the syntactical algorithm, a magnolia tree expressed the following sentiment:

Plants before all others.
Someone achieves peace in dreams,
without taming—beyond human beings.

Without presuming any agency on behalf of the magnolia, the only reliable data in this message is the response that it triggers. For myself, I notice my frustration with the ambiguity of “before” and “beyond,” and become lost trying to specify a “someone.” The words seem filled with menace and foreboding. It reminds me, in fact, of the Emerald Tablet of Hermes, an ancient Hellenistic text that became core for Medieval Muslim and Christian alchemists, and later for 20th-century esoterics. The latter group in particular gravitated towards the second line: “That which is above is like unto that which is below... all made in service to the miracle of the One Thing.”³

A hyperobject is something that exists but is too big to think of at once. If the mind needs to acknowledge the end of time, or the edge of the universe, for example, it breaks it down into questions and glimpses, as though it were trying to see down a cliff but could only peek quickly over the ledge every few steps. To see the Emerald Tablet’s One Thing, it advises you to take in the above and

² Stefan Rieger, “Chapter 4: What’s Talking? On the Nostalgic Epistemology of Plant Communication,” in Patricia Vieira, Monica Gagliano, and John Ryan, eds. *The Green Thread: Dialogue with the Vegetal World*. London: Lexington Books, 2016.

³ Rather than selecting between the many translations that are now available, this phrasing is pulled from my own memory—the version of the sentence that was similarly stuck in my head after I first encountered it. A number of translations are available at sacred-texts.com/alc/emerald.

the below, paying attention to their likeness, rather than looking for the miracle itself. The magnolia, perhaps cognisant that it was humans who were listening, can only describe its message as beyond them—situate yourself, it says, in order to understand what is around you. A pandemic is a hyperobject, described in numbers, graphs, and maps, so that only one of death, change, and blame have to be faced at a time. The climate is a hyperobject (but weather is not). Colonialism is another, manifesting the quality of viscosity, or “stickiness” that philosopher Timothy Morton describes—it is massive precisely because everything it’s involved with sticks to it.⁴

It is important to understand that the hyperobject is not a metaphor, because to relegate it to that realm would contradict the concept’s utility. The hyperobject helps to describe the limits of human thinking, to save us from the internment of a universe that is no larger than what we can imagine. The scales of time and size in *Oneirophyte* are huge, and the ideas that they tackle are as well. Using digital technologies enables the artists to play between the material and immaterial and therefore encompass the edgeless.

The artists in *Oneirophyte* take care to literalize their plants, and they do this by stepping back to an arm’s length and wedging an interface between themselves and their subjects. The artist is thus rendered algorithmic while the plant may add nuance to its self-expression, considering context and media as it does so. There is no question here as to whether human perception is sufficient. Not only is it insufficient, but detrimental, drowning out other ways of knowing with its hubris. The works of art are cyborgs with an artist on one end and a confounding intelligence on the other, separated by an artless mediator.

⁴ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.



Sylvia Matas' *House Plant* notices the soullessness of the surveillance camera, particularly as surveillance footage is made available to the general public. It is a process-centred work that brings to mind the image of the artist scouring the internet, her face illuminated by a screen in a sort of fugue, both intensely bored by her work and hopelessly fascinated by it. This is a search for the peculiar-yet-unnoticed and a comment on the apparatus of noticing. The cameras, of course, didn't choose to surveil the plants, so the choice gets passed on to the viewer. Whether the plants grew into the frame or the cameras were placed to view the plants in the first place, there is something conspiratorial about them, as though they're intentionally blocking a view, or, worse, staring back through the lens at us.

"Electrons disguised as plants," one subtitle reads, framed by a castor bean plant and a crush of grape vine. The work is a subversion, wherein the forms that distinguish us are incidental barriers to the recognition of the cellular units that unite us.

Helga Jakobson, likewise, concerns herself with the electricity in us and between us in her work with the song of Ayahuasca vine, betel, kava kava, salvia, and San Pedro cacti. Each of these plants is psychoactive to humans. Jakobson selected these plants at the crossroads of plant and human “dreaminess,” to “help blur consciousness in human consumers.”⁵ The plants’ bioelectricity translates through a mixer that applies the sound samples of a song by Sun Ra—a pioneer of electronic music and prominent Afro-futurist—to the plants’ different frequencies to become audible to humans. This is a framework in which one half of reciprocal communication is occurring—one of two parties is listening.



Adding to the symphony of studies⁶ about “languages” of plants, the experience of sensing the energy of the plant through auditory means inspires reflection on our own essential existence as bioelectric organisms. Their bioelectricity takes a unique, audible form. This is an opening that can accommodate a human body that perceives, and so affects, sounds. The sounds generated by the plants change according to what is near to them, what is moving, and what changes in their environment. The visitor’s own mass is the mechanism of communication, with intuition, empathy, and guesswork as the only tools of comprehension. They are a co-composer with the plants, knowing only that their presence is known.

5 Personal correspondence with the artist, September 18, 2023.

6 Many begin this journey with the 1973 book by Peter Tompkins, *The Secret Life of Plants* (New York: Harper & Row), which was adapted into a documentary film by the same name in 1978 (Dir. Walon Green, Infinite Enterprises.)



PREVIOUS PAGE: A gallery visitor listens to *Terrarium Soundscapes* by Helga Jakobson. Photo: AGSM, 2023.
ABOVE: Helga Jakobson, *Terrarium Soundscapes*, 2023. Photo: Doug Derksen, 2023.



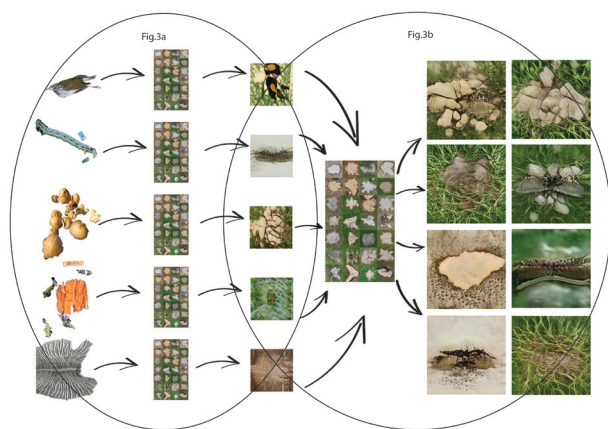
The installation *Arboreal Intuitions* acknowledges the presence of a body by springing to life via a motion sensor. Erika Jean Lincoln expands the processes of perception as they apply to comprehension—we are watching a machine learn what a plant form is, deeply. Lincoln calls her process “Crip-Techno-Tinkerism,” which describes an endlessly iterative process of invention, feedback, and adjustment while she observes the learning processes of her machines. Machine learning models, she says, have historically been described according to their alignment with typical human learning, privileging speed and precision.⁷ Understanding neurodiversity as a truism of existence,⁸ Lincoln throws a proverbial wrench in the perfection—that is, the reproducibility—that computer intelligence promises. *Arboreal Intuitions* introduces neuro-divergence into its machine learning methods, generating an accurate—that is to say, imperfect—memory of trees lost to Dutch Elm disease.

ABOVE: Erika Jean Lincoln, *Arboreal Intuitions*, 2023. Photo: Doug Derksen, 2023.

OPPOSITE LEFT: Diagram by the artist of the processes of image generation. Fig.3a. Rendering of Data hoards created with tree stump dataset. Fig.3b. Rendering of tangentiality transfer learning from images generated from hoards.

OPPOSITE RIGHT: Erika Jean Lincoln, *Arboreal Intuitions* (video still), 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

The AI model that Lincoln employs is trained in pattern recognition based on the diversity of 70,000 human faces stored in the Flickr-Faces-HQ dataset. Lincoln herself experiences tangentiality⁹ in her thought processes, a communication disorder that Lincoln credits with her “multi-sensory, cross-connective” creativity. She approaches her subjects (the actual tree stumps) inclusive of their environment. She is interested in not just the stumps, but also all of their nearby objects—flora, fauna, trash. This open mode of perception disrupts categorization and shares tangentiality with the artificial intelligence at work. To satisfy her own logic systems, Lincoln sorts her data (objects) into “hoards,” imagining piles of precious materials stored safely and protected fiercely. The “homemaker” pile of treasure informs the anamorphic and mutating wall projection through a xylem forest curtain, while other piles feed into the pen plotter. *Arboreal Intuitions* is an enormous and complicated work, and it is that enormity, the numerous steps and turns between a tree stump and its representation, that manifests divergence.



7 Personal correspondence with the artist, September 18, 2023.

8 Judy Singer, “Neurodiversity: Definition and Discussion.” Reflections on Neurodiversity (blog). N.D., <https://neurodiversity2.blogspot.com/p/what.html>

9 “Tangentiality refers to a disturbance in the thought process that causes the individual to relate excessive or irrelevant detail that never reaches the essential point of a conversation or the desired answer to a question.” from Balaram K, Marwaha R. Circumstantiality. [Updated 2022 Oct 17]. In: StatPearls [Internet]. *Treasure Island (FL)*: StatPearls Publishing; 2023 Jan-. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK532945/>

As digital technologies mediate the material world, they paradoxically make tangible expressions of organic form. Casey Koyczan employs LiDAR (Light Detection And Ranging) photography to enhance human vision. Formerly a specialized tool, LiDAR cameras now come standard on newer iPhone and iPad models. They work by measuring the bounce rate of lasers that it shoots at an object—like radar but with light—to form a detailed, 3D model of the object. In *ĩdii ; past in time*, Koyczan uses intricate models of real-world trees and branches as a jumping-off point for future imaginings. He recontextualizes the trees with elemental forces and distortion of form, removing determining landmarks or indications of atmosphere so they become celestial objects. The installation's material objects, conversely, sculpt the mythologically empty “white cube” gallery space into an prescriptive, concave environment that expects visitors to approach, circumnavigate, and gaze. While the images on the monitors, as the artist puts it, “focus on the energy, aura, and chemical makeup” of the trees,¹⁰ the floating driftwood and astroturf carpet enclose the viewer in an environment of their own making.



Koyczan is interested in how future generations and other species might interpret the environment of today by emphasizing the reciprocity between agents and their places—in this case, trees and their landscape. As the climate contributes to these trees, the trees contribute to the climate, living within and without.

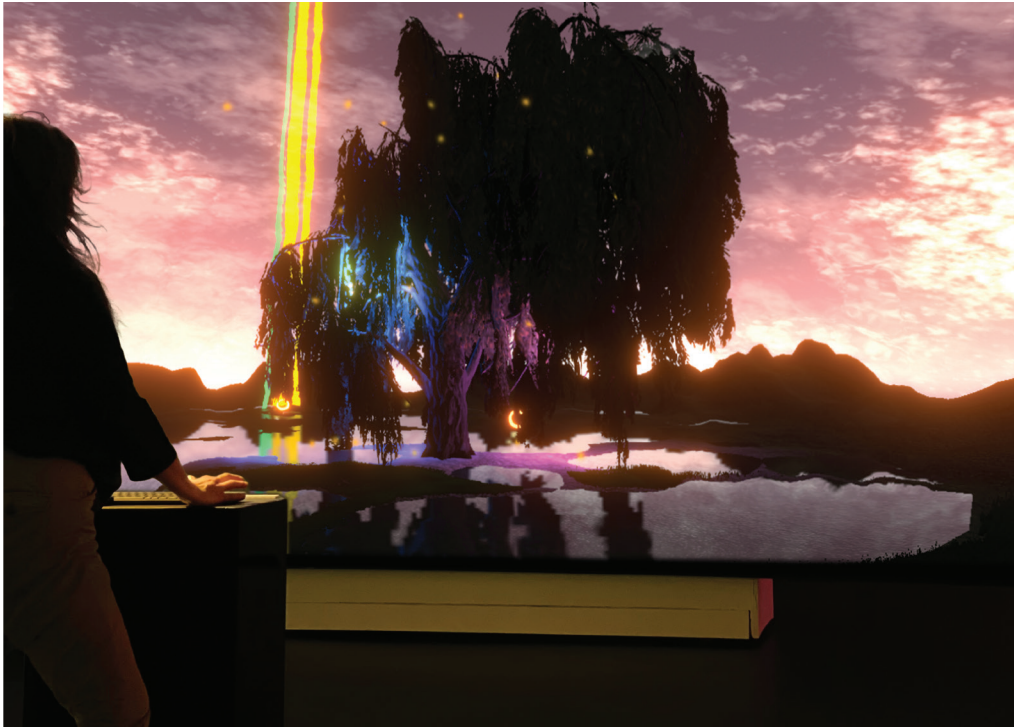
10 Personal correspondence with the artist, September 18, 2023.



OPPOSITE: Casey Koyczan, *jdii ; past in time*, 2023. Photo: AGSM, 2023.

ABOVE: Casey Koyczan, *jdii 4: Life*, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist.

Reciprocity is also at the core of Taylor McArthur's game-based artwork, *Line of Sight*. It is an interactive work, injecting vitality into the medium, literally being activated by life. Using a personalized visual language that combines organic shapes with geometric ones and natural colours with neon, McArthur has translated her inner world of memories and experiences into a limited terrain. Portals are scattered throughout, which transport the player from one corner of the valley to another in a way that mimics thought and reinforces the connections between memory, identity, and land. Players cannot approach the trunk of the dominant landmark,



ABOVE: A Gallery visitor plays *Line of Sight* by Taylor McArthur. Photo: AGSM 2023.

OPPOSITE: Taylor McArthur, *Line of Sight*, 2021 (installation view). Photo: Doug Derksen, 2023.

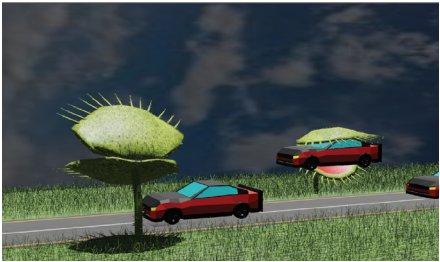


a gnarled, ancient, and glowing willow, except through one of these portals. The willow, like the other memory cyphers in the game, is protected by a transparent cube that can only be entered via a portal. From this viewpoint, the portals, which are tempting destinations elsewhere

in the landscape, are reconfigured into sentries, redirecting the player to new spaces, and keeping this ancient tree and precious memories safe.

There is something of play in all of these artworks on the basis of their interactivity, the implication of the human visitor in the plant realm. In all of the masses of research that have been done on plant sentience and communication, writers frequently introduce their studies with a defensive tone, and it is often directed towards the Western scholarly and scientific communities. Though I resist this impulse, anecdotally, I understand it. I once found myself at a holiday dinner party where neuroscientists were in the majority, and I posed the premise that plants are intelligent to the table. They unanimously agreed that without a central cognitive system, it's not possible. Any resemblance to intelligence would be mere wordplay.

But of course, all language plays with words, and the generative power of art is that it can move at the speed of play, as opposed to Western science, which moves at the speed of evidence, utility, and funding. These artists are using digital media to think about plants for the same reason that AI technologies are being rolled out for use in creative fields as much as they are for the mundane, repetitive ones: seeing what will happen is an end in itself. All of the tinkering, strolling, and eavesdropping of these practices creates a space that is open to more wondering.



Playing with these words, “wondering,” “imagining,” “dreaming,” in proximity to plants widens the scope of all of them, makes them less material, more translucent, more alike, more singular.

The very number of essential questions posed in *Oneirophyte* speaks to the ontological importance of plants as agents in our waking world. In the spring term of 2023, the final-year students of Assiniboine Community College’s Digital Art & Design Program tackled this theme, and the resulting work demonstrates similar playing with words, speculating on dreaming in terms of the subconscious, the hallucinatory, and or the aspirational. They imagine how a plant might feel the fractured time of sleeping dreams, and what kind of forms might emerge from unstructured thoughts. In the future-thinking sense of the word, they suppose that plants might want revenge on pollutants, or to roam free like animals. What would a plant want to be if it could be anything?



ABOVE (TOP AND BOTTOM): Juanita Cook, *Hunting Venus Fly Trap*, 2023. Images courtesy of the artist.
OPPOSITE: Andy Kim, *Plant Human*, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist.

That “anything,” like the magnolia’s “someone,” and Hermes “One Thing,” touch on the data points and electric fields of the plants who headline *Oneirophyte* as well as the artists who communicate them and the visitors who view them. When, at my dinner party, I was confronted with the evidence of plants’ lack of a central cognitive system, I wondered about the table that we sat around. The cognition of the five of us, I thought, must be something different than our five minds, alone.



Long before the vast majority of Canadians carried a personal pocket computer in them at all times, A mathematician named Norbert Wiener wrote a book about systems of communication and control. Its title shares its Greek root with the word “governor,” and the book, *Cybernetics*, is an encompassing look at the way that the world works. There is a joke among cyberneticists about defining the discipline, because it encompasses seemingly everything with a determined structure, from laws of entropy to the events of the central nervous system, natural selection, and self-replicating machines.¹¹ Today, this book title provides the prefix to all things computer: cyberpunk, cyborg, cyber security. Prefixes are sub-categories, reflective of a desire to get more

specific. The contrary desire accounts for the work in *Oneirophyte*. Telling a biological story technologically creates a feedback loop—a categorization down to the electron—so massive that it might as well be everything.

¹¹ Stafford Beer, “What is cybernetics?”, *Kybernetes*, Vol. 31 No. 2. 2002. pp. 209-219.

ARTWORKS AND ARTISTS

Helga Jakobson

Terrarium Soundscape I, Salvia, Betel, and Kava Kava plants; Arduino, Raspberry Pi, glass, and wooden stand, 2023. 20 x 24 x 57"

Terrarium Soundscape II, Ayahuasca vine, and San Pedro Cacti; Arduino, Raspberry Pi, glass, and wooden stand, 2023. 20 x 24 x 57"

Helga Jakobson (she/her) is a transdisciplinary artist living on Treaty One Territory, often working in new media, with a particular affinity for sound as medium. Her practice focuses on loss, death and ephemerality. Lately her research has centred around the sixth mass extinction that we are living in, as well as how to live on a damaged earth and how to make tangible the almost invisible and inaudible losses that are occurring all around us.

Casey Koyczan

jdi ; past in time, LiDar Scans, 3D software, driftwood, cable, artificial turf, 2023. Installation, dimensions variable, appx. 12 x 12 x 12'

To create with unrestricted freedom. To make the unrealistic a reality. To imagine environments unbound by the laws of physics. To imagine our people and stories in the future.

Casey Koyczan is a Dene interdisciplinary artist from Yellowknife, NT, that uses various mediums to communicate how culture and technology can grow together in order for us to develop a better understanding of who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. He creates with whatever tools necessary to bring an idea to fruition; specializing in sculpture, installation, 3D/VR/AR/360, video, and audio works such as music, soundscapes and film scores.

Koyczan is an international artist that has participated in many residencies, exhibits, festivals and collaborations in parts of the world such as Finland, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, The Netherlands, The USA, the UK, and in Italy for the Venice Biennale. He is also a musician, producer, filmmaker, actor/narrator, and advocate for future generations of artists and musicians.

He has a Multimedia Production diploma from Lethbridge College, a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Thompson Rivers University, and a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Manitoba.

Erika Jean Lincoln

Arboreal Intuitions, Wood, paper, electronics, ink, video and sound, AI generated images, software, 2023. Installation, dimensions variable.

Erika Jean is most comfortable immersed in the world of sonic rumblings, tactile perceptions, and visual illusions. She reflects her cross-sensory world through immersive installations and kinetic sculpture. Her media art practice is an assistive intermediary through which she expresses her intellectual and material investigations into the dominant ideologies and narratives embedded in technoscientific cultures and their devices. This practice involves re-engineering communication and information systems and devices to provide alternative representations of the world from a neurodivergent perspective.

Erika Jean is a graduate of the University of Manitoba with a BFA in sculpture and video and a BA in European history and philosophy. She has exhibited at The Bauhaus-Archiv (Germany); The Science Gallery (Ireland); Boston Cyberarts Gallery (USA); MAT-UC Santa Barbara (USA); PlugIN-ICA (Canada). She has been awarded grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and attended residencies at Banff Centre (Canada), Medialab Prado (Spain), and the Blue Mountain Center (USA). She has collaborated with engineers at the University of Queens Ingenuity Lab and with neuroscientists at the University of Manitoba. She lives in Winnipeg-Treaty 1 territory. This site is entangled with the Mississippi migratory flyway, on the bed of an ancient glacial lake, at the northern limit of the monarch butterfly's migration, 300 km from the geographic centre of Turtle Island, 49° 53' 42.2772" N 97° 8' 18.4236" W.

Sylvia Matas

House Plant, Single-channel video, 3'18", 2022.

Sylvia Matas is an artist living on Treaty One Territory in Winnipeg. Her practice combines images and language resulting in videos, books, texts, and drawings. She received her MFA from the Chelsea College of Art in London, England. Her work has been exhibited at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, Gallery 44, YYZ Artist's Outlet, Mercer Union (Toronto), the Maclaren Art Centre (Barrie, ON), The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Plug In ICA (Winnipeg), Truck Contemporary Art (Calgary), and Útúrdúr (Reykjavik).

Taylor McArthur

Line of Sight, Immersive WebGL experience, 2021 -

Taylor McArthur (Pogé ḥąská wašté wiyá/Hummingbird Woman) Nakoda of Pheasant Rump Nakota First Nation. Raised in Southwestern Manitoba currently residing in Winnipeg, Manitoba. McArthur is an award-winning digital artist working with 3D animation, video game design, and video. Her practice is informed by Indigenous Futurisms, and she seeks to situate her Indigenous culture within both the modern and a potential future vision. She's received the 2023 Platform Photography Award, 2022 Emerging Digital Artists Award and the 2022 Winnipeg Arts Council's RBC On the Rise Award.

Final year students of the Digital Art & Design Program at Assiniboine Community College

Oneirophyte, All 2023

Officially opening in January of 2023, the Centre for Creative Media at Assiniboine Community College in Brandon is a 10,050 square foot, multi-functional space, including classrooms for students working on post-production, alongside a dedicated screening area with a high-end projector and sound system, a state-of-the-art print shop, radio station, and more. Students of the Media & Communications, Digital Art & Design, and Web & Interactive Development programs, all of which were launched in 2021, are the primary users of the centre, which can welcome up to 60 students a year. Students complete an eight-week practicum placement as well as a collaborative "capstone" project.

The 2023 final year students were: Juanita Cook, Nathan Evernden, Miranda Greer, Sierra Hadway, Alyssa Jansen, Andy Kim, Jessie Kwok, Minh Nguyen, Jenny Paul, Michelle Pineda, Anh Nguyen, Vince Salazar, and Erich Schmidt.

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The AGSM is located in Treaty Two Territory, and as such would like to acknowledge and honour the fact that we are on the traditional shared land of Cree, Oji-Cree, Anishinaabeg, Dene, and Dakota Peoples, as well as the homeland of the Métis Nation. This acknowledgement is also a pledge to act always in the spirit of accountability, responsibility, and reconciliation.



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