NATURE FOR OUR SAKE

by

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"Nature’s modern role as the mirror of a human-centered cosmos is reproduced in its object status, with science and industry constantly perfecting ways to retain this evanescent realm."

—Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience*

**PREFACE**

My work creates a dialogue between consumer products, built environments, and modes of beautification. It is a result of being an observer and a consumer, attentive to the aesthetics and products that shape contemporary American ideals. By using materials that reference the artifice, I criticize definitions of the natural world and consumerism while acknowledging the irony of being complicit—the shopper at the checkout with faux stone wallpaper and “granite” flakes. Our relationship to the natural world has evolved into an idealized incorporation and displacement of something beautiful. By combining diverse materials and methods of making, I create associations between image and object—blending concepts of the real and synthetic, found and fabricated. I examine the human relationship to nature and structure, both intrinsic and
deeply rooted concepts in American history, recognizing the absurdities and playfully pulling from them.

I. NATURE AND HUMAN CONSTRUCTION: THE ARTIFICE

I grew up in the American Midwest, a child of two baby boomers. My father prides himself on his impeccable lawn and my mother on her carefully potted arrangements and minimally decorated home. Perfection and order have always been familiar concepts surrounding everyday life and I recently started to trace their origin and impact. For me it seems obvious to question the evenly spaced houses, tree-lined streets, and manicured properties of suburbia, aspects that I am both attracted to and repelled by. It has become more apparent over the years that a duality lies in the answer: satisfaction and obligation.

“A neat landscape is inherently good in our minds; we see it as beautiful. And if a neat landscape is beautiful, people who maintain their properties by these standards are people we respect, trust, and admire. To own a neat landscape, a tidy garden, is to have high status” (Tallamy 291). Within that framework, lies the notion of the American Dream, an idiom based on a certain set of ideals amounting to upward mobility and home ownership—both of which have become synonymous with suburbia and consumerism.

Through American history and culture, humans have formed a complex relationship to the natural world. As an artist, my interests originated in documenting
and responding to pattern formation, repetition, and the visual purity of nature. I collect shells and rocks, fragments of places once visited. Photographs that I take of the everyday, from natural occurrences to human interventions, are a record of my observations as well as source material for ideas and physical manifestations.

The awe-inspiring aspects of the natural world are repeatedly captured and explored through various art forms. John Charles Van Dyke’s *Nature for Its Own Sake: First Studies in Natural Appearances* describes light, various skies, clouds, precipitation, mountains, the sea, the coast, and all the beauty that surrounds the wonders of the earth. It is poetically written from pure observation, “simply to call attention to that nature around us which only too many people look at every day and yet never see, to show that light, form, and color are beautiful regardless of human meaning or use” (Van Dyke x). My early work was influenced and visually rooted in this methodology while being conceptually driven by process and material [fig. 1]. As my own observations have become more refined and my research more directed, I consider a very divergent interpretation—Nature for Our Sake: for the consumer and spectator, for pleasure and leisure, for adornment and aesthetic.

What does it mean to live in a place that is constructed to perfection, a place where nature is removed and then, occasionally, replaced to our own satisfaction? Why do people collect natural specimens or build containers for living things such as aquariums or greenhouses? These questions led me to consider Western culture’s
fascination with the natural world, one that is organized, controlled, and maintained in such a way that is preserved for spectatorship. Even when we are exposed to nature—what we have defined and fabricated to be natural—the experience is created through paths and vistas or the cultural constructions of museums and zoos.

Humans have an innate desire to classify and contain nature. This is first apparent in the construction of civilizations and gardens, sites that separate us from the wild, where humans are in power. Similarly, architecture seeks to create a controlled environment that serves as a container for protection and customization, while acting as a barrier between nature and its contents. *Vivarium Dream (Model #701364)* [figures 2, 3] implies a house, life-size terrarium or diorama. Materials were collected from their natural environment, the consumer market, and placed on display for the curious observer.

Among the first mass collectibles originating in Victorian England in the mid-nineteenth century were domestic aquariums and ferns. It was “a true-mass culture phenomenon: one where an object or cluster of objects becomes the focus of an obsessive and pervasive consumption that, despite its seriality or multiplicity, is felt as intimately personal” (Olalquiaga 12). The structure of *Vivarium Dream (Model #701364)* is a mass-produced greenhouse, where an artificial fern hangs in the center of its own simulated habitat. The environment is furnished with carpet, decorative base molding, lighting, faux rock speakers and stone covers, plaster gravel, and a waterfall scene.
Assembled in a similar way in which a person would select and arrange the furnishing of their home or garden, everything has a place and a purpose. Analogous to the motives of constructing formal parks and gardens—from Versailles to Central Park to botanical gardens built today—*Vivarium Dream (Model #701364)* is structured to provide an experience of the natural world, convincingly reproducing what is believed to be nature in all its artifice.

The artificial fern represents a then and now parallel: the cultural craze of the Victorian Era known as Pteridomania and my introduction to, and fascination with, ferns of the South. Then, ferns were marketed in such a way that made them desirable must-haves and were “variously described as ‘plumy emerald green pets glistening with health and beadings of warm dew’” (Olalquiaga 47). Ferns do not have many useful characteristics, so “they had qualities – beauty, elegance, charm, grace, delicacy, strength – ascribed to them instead” (Whittingham 25). Fast-forward to the twenty-first century and online shopping, where the language used to describe the artificial Boston fern is quite different. Less romanticized, SilkTreeWarehouse.com is still attempting similar devices: “The fern is amazingly life-like. The branches may be shaped for that personal touch. Our artificial trees are stunning. You’ll find it hard to believe it’s artificial!”

There is an immortal beauty this artificial fern possesses, further emphasized by the plasticity of green latex paint added to the ends of various fronds at altering
heights to indicate a synthetic transformation in its cycle [figure 4]. What does it imply to be a plant that never dies? Crystallized and unaltered by time, the fern represents our incessant desire to preserve beauty, for adornment and aesthetic. Discounting the time, effort, or resources it takes to fabricate—we have the capacity, therefore we will.

Wall coverings have existed in many forms throughout history, from cave paintings and frescos, to tapestries and wallpaper. Today, digital technology and contemporary trends allow for the same concept to be applied to the home interior market. High-resolution images and photographs printed on adhesive material can be applied to any room in any scale creating a simulated environment. In Vivarium Dream (Model #701364), the waterfall image functions as aquarium backing or a wall decal, adding “visual interest” and a sense of place.

Waterfalls have a long history of enchantment, being depicted in paintings and included in literature, referring to the sublime in nature—a tranquil paradise. The inkjet print was taken in northern Georgia at Panther Creek and signifies my exposure to the exotic natural beauty of the South as well as the allure of nature we do not experience on a daily basis. “As a static composition, a waterfall in a setting of rocks and vegetation offers a spatial experience; the swift passage of water and the slow seasonal changes convey a sense of time. Thus part of the attraction of waterfalls may consist in this balance of immutability and change, stillness and movement, space and time” (Hudson 71). Constructed gardens and landscapes often have a water feature such as a
fountain or cascade and “very often, the tourist image of paradise includes a verdant mountain landscape enlivened by cascading streams and idyllic waterfalls” (Hudson 92). Their representations seduce our imaginations, both static and animated. Electronically backlit waterfalls that appear to be in constant motion are undeniably mesmerizing and unrelentingly kitsch [figure 5].

The rocks contained within Vivarium Dream (Model #701364) are both decorative and functional, manufactured to blend in with the surrounding landscape. Two of the rocks are speakers, projecting a synthetic sound similar to the “ocean waves” one can hear by holding a seashell to the ear. The other two rocks are enclosures intended to cover unsightly wells, pipes or sprinkler valves. Instead, they are hiding the electronic devices necessary to produce the sound and light within the greenhouse. Collectively, the rocks operate their marketed purposes as well as mimic the substrate of a terrarium habitat. “Lacking a life of their own, rocks serve in turn as platforms for both the natural architecture of anemones and corals and the social sculpturing of buildings and monuments” (Olalquiaga 171). The base of the greenhouse was a decorative addition used to imitate a structural foundation, treated with Valspar® Stone Spray Paint. Combined, these objects point to the presence and the absence of both form and function.

Homeowners often museumify their landscape by incorporating spot lighting on trees and shrubs. To allude to this in Vivarium Dream (Model #701364), a light fixture is
placed within the hardscape of plaster gravel, pointing directly at the fern. Spotlights give visual attention, indicating importance and presentation—of what? The plants that we place to adorn our home and garden.

II. The Lawn

"It was a moment when the West perceived the world as an object of contemplation and spectatorial delight while readying its mercantile profitability and intellectual consumption."

—Celeste Olalquiaga, The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience

Ancient myths and Biblical testaments include constructed utopias or sacred gardens that reflect the idyllic relationship humans have with nature. “A garden, then, is the result of humanity’s attempt to carve out an ideal place in nature, thereby fashioning a ‘perfect’ Earth” (Giesecke & Jacobs 9). Living in harmony with nature has evolved over time to emphasize man’s power over the natural world, where ‘safety, happiness, and progress depended on rising out of a wilderness situation. It became essential to gain control over nature” (Jenkins 117). The obsessively manicured lawns that are landscaped with precision and order were not advertised in America until the
mid-nineteenth century. Even then, it was unattainable for landowners without the proper plants and tools. “Before the invention of the hand-pushed lawn mower, the rubber hose and sprinkler, pesticides, herbicides, and commercial fertilizer, and the introduction of appropriate lawn grasses, lawns as we know them today were impossible” (Jenkins 9-10).

When consumerism became a fundamental component of American culture in the early twentieth century, “new advertising agencies and writers for popular magazines offered advice and instruction to the expanding middle class on how to achieve the perfect front lawn that would announce that the owner was a good neighbor, a good citizen, and a good family man” (Jenkins 63). It was about creating the American landscape that exhibited the American dream. With every homeowner being the audience for lawn care products, new marketing strategies insisted on the necessities of having a lawn: an indicator of virtue and status.

The front lawn of Vivarium Dream (Model #701364) functions as a set display titled plot [fig. 6]. Though two separate entities, the parallels are significant. The white plaster panels that hang in the background of plot were cast from the polycarbonate windows of the greenhouse and are displayed in exact proportion of the physical structure. The 4-foot by 6-foot dimension of the lawn is the same footprint as the base of the greenhouse and exists as a stage for the other components to interact. The title, plot, refers to both the narrative term and a measured piece of land that is considered
a unit. The pile of cast plaster rocks are lit by a decorative house lamp that mimics a stage light—placing a spotlight on the (performative) process of mass producing such a mundane material and the labor involved in landscaping. “American homeowners spend billions of dollars plus untold hours and energy in their front lawns every year” (Jenkins 2). My father is a perfect example of this. Our property line ends before the photograph begins and the grass he tirelessly maintains is city property [fig. 7]. Covered in weeds and various grasses, he removed the unattractive plants, raked, sowed grass seeds and now cares for it as if it were his own. Why? So there is an uninterrupted view to the tree-lined creek. Conversely, it is a creative outlet that yields fulfillment through the action, time, and process.

Everything is white in plot, except for the bright yellow garden hose, to suggest the purity of a lawn free of pests, weeds, and other unsightly nuisances. Historically, the color white has been used across cultures to suggest cleanliness and perfection and plot displays the seemingly unattainable perfection advertised in home and garden publications. The perimeter of Vivarium Dream (Model #701364) relates both materially and conceptually to plot. White turf surrounds the greenhouse suggesting a white picket fence, the passé symbolism of middle-class suburban life in America [fig. 8]. Although entirely decorative, it became an iconic suggestion of wealth, security and happiness—just as a well-manicured lawn surrounding the home did. It was about advertising, the homeowner to the onlooker and the industry to the consumer.
Being the only element saturated with color, the yellow garden hose calls attention to the beauty of itself as an object [fig. 9]. It acts as a metaphor for sustenance, providing the artificial landscape with artificial nutrients. Though the color yellow is a symbolic representation of sunlight, warmth, and stimulation, it is hollow, empty, and useless. Used only for aesthetic purposes, the hose serves as a compositional element, visually connecting the background to the foreground. The concepts within plot point to the unnatural and absurd motives humans have established that communicate a language through materials, objects, color, and ultimately advertising. Conceivably, yellow garden hoses will be the next marketed trend.

III. Consumer Products: Materials and Objects

I have an incessant desire to accumulate matter, recognizing beauty and potential in the mundane. I am drawn to materials because of their inherent ability to become something else, often repurposing items that have a specific function in the commercial world. Many of which I rarely discard and will store until they are re-imagined. I pick out paint colors for their name and potential association to the concepts present in the work. I organize, fill, and label boxes with packaging material, drywall chunks, samples of countertops and various flooring applications. Around the perimeter of my studio are piles of vinyl siding, crown molding, wallpaper, and fake plant debris. I find it fascinating that “our impressions of beauty continually swing
between stylistic polarities: the retrained and the exuberant; the rustic and the urban; the feminine and the masculine – leading us ruthlessly to abandon objects to expire in junk shops at every swerve” (de Botton 154). That exact notion was how I acquired several boxes of tiles and flooring samples as they were deemed outdated.

The nature of my current work requires me to be subjected to consumer culture and “buying something is at once an economic act, a social act and an act of creativity and imagination” (Price 196). A large part of my practice involves documenting and observing methods of product display, from store aisles to showrooms [fig. 10]. By collecting materials both purchased and discarded, my studio is an exhibition of consumerism, giving materials another venue to be on display for potential assembly. Storefront windows, aisle displays, and showrooms operate as designated spaces to market products, employing methods of presentation that make the merchandise more desirable— making it feel necessary [fig. 11]. I have begun to imagine my completed works as objects for display, with the ability to exist in various arrangements, creating alternative relationships dependent on proximity and materials used [fig 12].

Two works in particular, sea scene and sands function as sample swatches. Both integrate materials selected based on their names and associations to an idea. During a Home Depot® adventure, I scoured the home improvement aisles in search of all things “sand” while visualizing the ways in which they would coalesce into a seaside palette. For sands [fig. 13], products were selected based on their given names:
Cape Sands, Bleached Sand—Sand Texture Additive.

Beach Glass.

Color Flakes: Sand Mix.

Unrelated, except by association, I find it to be true that “selection and organization allows collectors to establish a particular relation with their objects: no matter how common, an object can always be rescued from its apparent banality by the investment in it of personal meaning” (Olalquiaga 17).

For me, collections of objects (or products) rely on methods of organization. Similar to the ways in which natural history museums or zoos categorize their collections through the architecture of their spaces, leading the spectator through specific settings or habitats. Both establishments utilize views or framing devices that guide the viewer through a narrative. “In this case the frame can be converted into the window, which selectively envisions its natural exterior, now a “landscape,” no longer beyond its partition but within the enframed space of the room. It selectively brings in a now framed outside, a view or vista” (Grosz 14). For aquarium [fig. 14], vertical blinds are used to frame and contain the view while denying any depth of reality—just as a painted backdrop of an aquarium alludes to a much greater space while simultaneously confirming the artifice. In the exhibition, Suspended Preservatives, the notion of the view as a lookout point was further emphasized with stone stack acting as a prop, or
post. It suggests: stand here, look, take a picture; while the pastiche of jungle [fig. 15] requires the viewer to observe disorder as opposed to the natural order that is typically provided by a real landscape.

CONCLUSION

“Artifice, the very essence of artistic activity, is the potent instrument of insight into the machinations of the real and to constructedness of the “real” within the shared imaginary of any culture. Making that experience into formal, material expression creates the cultural legacy and memory that is art.”

—Johanna Drucker, Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity

As humans, we find comfort in the fake—we have created it, controlled it, and contained it. As an artist, I create work that represents my interests in the ordinarily absurd constructions that define contemporary culture, transforming observations and lived experiences into emblematic form. We use objects (and spaces) to define ourselves and personalize them, just as my father exudes civic pride from his neat lawn, tailored to his own satisfaction. We have perfected the way we encounter nature and manipulate our surroundings, for the sake of our pleasure—so much so that we refuse to perceive it as synthetic. I suppose beauty lies in noting the artifice.
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vertical blinds, inkjet print, latex paint, wallpaper

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