

## GARDENS & GROTTOS

An Interdisciplinary Investigation into Passages of Becoming  
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In the Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design Program.

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## GARDENS & GROTTOS

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Sarah Carlson

OCAD University

Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

Master of Fine Arts

2019

## ABSTRACT

*Gardens & Grottoes* speculates on messy entanglements between more-than-human agencies within the topos of the grotto, both as an architectural garden feature and vital subterranean ecosystem. By examining the aestheticization of plants, animals, rocks, soils, water and air through art and landscape architecture, this thesis argues for a refiguring of personhood beyond boundaries and into a more porous, interconnected conception of self. In our time of significant anthropogenic impact, where humans are often pictured as dominant, yet separate from ecologies, this investigation proposes an immersed and enmeshed conception of humanity. The artistic exploration diffractively reads through notions of biophilia, bodies and *becoming* within cavernous garden aesthetics in order to challenge human exceptionality and consider expanded subjectivities. Through movement, multi-sensory engagement and representational blurring of bodies, the exhibition invites intimate encounters and collaboration with the beings present.

**Keywords:** trans-corporeality, anthropocene, biophilia, more-than-human, becoming, movement, subjectivity, installation, sculpture, painting

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## **CONTENTS**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| List of Figures                         | vi        |
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>                     | <b>1</b>  |
| 1.1 Gardens & Grottoes: The Exhibition  | 4         |
| 1.2 Substratum                          | 11        |
| 1.2 Subterranean                        | 19        |
| <b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b>                | <b>26</b> |
| 2.1 Cultivation                         | 29        |
| 2.2 Picturesque                         | 32        |
| 2.3 Disembodied Vision                  | 35        |
| 2.4 Becoming                            | 37        |
| 2.5 Compost                             | 41        |
| <b>RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</b>             | <b>44</b> |
| 3.1 Embedded Pondering                  | 44        |
| 3.2 Embodied Precarity                  | 47        |
| 3.3 Movement                            | 49        |
| 3.4 Care                                | 51        |
| <b>CONCLUSION</b>                       | <b>53</b> |
| 4.1 Sifting and Surfacing               | 53        |
| 4.2 Bibliography                        | 56        |
| 4.3 Appendix: Thesis Exhibition Details | 61        |

## FIGURES

All figures are the work of Sarah Carlson except where indicated.

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Figure 1. Bernardo Buontalenti, <i>Grotta Grande</i> , 1583-1593.<br>Photo: Carlson, 2018. | 2  |
| Figure 2. Nexus Cave, Eremosa Karst. Photo: Carlson, 2018.                                 | 3  |
| Figure 3. <i>Vera</i> , Detail, 2019.  | 5  |
| Figure 4. <i>Undergrowth</i> , Installation Process Detail, 2019.                          | 6  |
| Figure 5. <i>Karst Composting</i> , Installation Process Detail, 2019.                     | 8  |
| Figure 6. <i>Transformations</i> , Process Detail, 2019.                                   | 12 |
| Figure 7. <i>Earthing</i> , Installation Detail, 2018.                                     | 15 |
| Figure 8. <i>Chrysalis I</i> , Installation Detail, 2018.                                  | 16 |
| Figure 9. <i>Tentacular Traces</i> , Installation Detail, 2018.                            | 18 |
| Figure 10. <i>Karst Composting</i> , Video Still, 2019.                                    | 25 |
| Figure 11. <i>Undergrowth: Touching Bodies</i> , 2019.                                     | 32 |
| Figure 12. <i>Karst Composting</i> , Video Still, 2019.                                    | 41 |
| Figure 13. <i>Karst Composting</i> , Video Still, 2019.                                    | 43 |
| Figure 14. <i>Surface Bodies</i> , Installation Detail, 2018.                              | 50 |
| Figure 15. <i>Gardens &amp; Grottoes</i> , Exhibition Detail, 2019.                        | 61 |
| Figure 16. <i>Passages</i> , Installation Detail, 2019.                                    | 61 |
| Figure 17. <i>Undergrowth</i> , Installation Detail, 2019.                                 | 62 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Figure 18. <i>Undergrowth</i> , Installation Detail, 2019.          | 62 |
| Figure 19. <i>Gardens &amp; Grottoes</i> , Exhibition Detail, 2019. | 63 |
| Figure 20. <i>Surface Bodies</i> , Installation Detail, 2019.       | 63 |
| Figure 21. <i>Surface Bodies</i> , Installation Detail, 2019.       | 64 |
| Figure 22. <i>Surface Bodies</i> , Installation Detail, 2019.       | 64 |
| Figure 23. <i>Chrysalis II</i> , Installation Detail, 2019.         | 65 |
| Figure 24. <i>Karst Composting</i> , Installation Detail, 2019.     | 65 |
| Cover Page: Detail of <i>Karst Composting</i> Video Still, 2019.    |    |

## INTRODUCTION

My thesis for the Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design features an immersive installation at Ignite Gallery in Toronto, Ontario. The investigation surveys the construction of a prescribed *nature* in art and landscape architectural practices and proposes new ways of perceiving humans as interconnected within dynamic ecologies. The term *nature* is used in this paper to refer to the particular colonial conception of a pure wilderness untouched by humans. Throughout my inquiry, I prefer to follow Donna Haraway's example in *The Companion Species Manifesto* and use *naturecultures* to acknowledge the inseparability of *nature* and *culture*.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, for the purpose of not reinscribing the human and non-human binary, in this paper I will use the term *more-than-human*<sup>2</sup> to encompass human along with the predetermined categories of flora and fauna, environmental elements and forces. I argue that an expanded understanding of subjectivity is required to engage with the complex urgencies of our environmentally-compromised times. The

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 1.

exhibition explores this conceptual opening of personhood through an assemblage of interdisciplinary art-based approaches grounded in the theoretical framework of material feminist posthumanism.<sup>3</sup> From an intersectional feminist lens, this position draws on the interrelationships of new materialisms, which emphasize materiality as agential, and posthumanisms, which overturn conventional hierarchies that privilege the human over other forms of existence. I use this combination of movements because I believe that significant overlapping areas exist and are generative in this art-based exploration.



Fig. 1. Bernardo Buontalenti, *Grotta Grande*, 1583-1593. Photo: Carlson, 2018.

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<sup>3</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics & Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 12.

My enquiry flows out of personal experiences of being immersed and enmeshed within two very different grotto environments during the summer and fall of 2018. The first is an architectural garden feature built between 1583 and 1593 by Bernardo Buontalenti in Florence Italy's Boboli Gardens. The second is Eramosa Karst, located in Hamilton Ontario, the ancestral Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee land from the Dish with One Spoon Treaty. The karst ecosystem is sculpted by carbonic acid from rainwater seeping into the soil and dolostone-limestone bedrock over thousands of years.



Fig. 2. Nexus Cave, Eramosa Karst. Photo: Carlson, 2018.

The word *grotto* comes from the Latin *crypta* meaning vault or to hide, as well as the Italian *grotta* or French *grotte* which refers to a subterranean



passage, cavern, cave or pit.<sup>4</sup> I am drawn to the intermingling of geologic, chemical, biological and cultural histories inscribed in these liminal, porous spaces of assemblage. These are the sites for my theoretical investigation into more permeable notions of personhood and serve as the point of departure for my art-based explorations.

## 1.1 GARDENS & GROTTOS: THE EXHIBITION

At the entrance to the main gallery space is a pergola archway with sculpted stalactites and hanging plants, emphasizing the portal of the gallery itself and suggesting a sense of passage. Climbable structures, painted to resemble a cave opening are mounted on the wall and feature organically-sculpted rock climbing holds resembling various fossilized plant and animal bodies. These tactile, modular sculptures are marked with coloured tape to indicate the various pathways one could take when touching or climbing the work. Sounds of trickling water echo throughout the exhibition from the *Fountain Flora*, two sculpted fountains referencing bodily plants with fleshy features.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Renaissance*, s.v. "Grotto", ed. Gordon Campbell (Oxford University Press, 2005), DOI:10.1093/acref/9780198601753.001.0001. Naomi Miller, *Heavenly Caves: Reflections on the Garden Grotto* (New York: G. Braziller, 1982), 10.



Fig. 3. Vera, Fountain Flora detail, winterstone, resin, water pump, 2019.

A ten-foot wide by five-foot high marbled geodesic canvas stretched over a steel climbing structure, with climbable sculptures incorporating mosses, plants and human hair, sits in the corner of the main gallery for haptic engagement. The steel climbing structure is a repurposed climbing set using the geodesic architecture and design principles that Buckminster Fuller popularized in the 1940s and 50s. By stretching a marble-painted canvas over the steel, *Undergrowth* acknowledges the monumentality of Fuller's utopian design philosophy, while the painted figurative representations of landscape play with Fuller's notion of a "fluid geography" that connects "nature's coordinate system" on macro and

micro scales.<sup>5</sup> Viewed with the light of a headlamp, the interior of the geodesic grotto reveals an elaborately painted night gardenscape with various recognizable and fictitious flora dancing under a cosmic sky. Suspended from the triangulated steel frame are sculpted stalactite planters that contain living ivy, pothos and other plants requiring low light. The lumens emitted from headlamps supplement the light received from a grow light placed near the plants each night.



Fig. 4. *Undergrowth*, installation process detail, 2019.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael K. Hays ed. *Starting with the Universe: Buckminster Fuller* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008). This exhibition catalogue elaborates on Fuller's philosophy based on "nature's coordinate system" and his geological engagement with architecture.

In the projection room, a video of Eramosa Karst is projected onto hanging plants and stalactite planters. The video is comprised of footage and audio I took while hiking and spelunking in the area over a two-month period. Intercut with moving images of lush landscape, trickling streams and active insects is footage of my mud-covered body, climbing inside the chamber of Nexus Cave in Eremosa Karst. The video file is intentionally corrupted through a process called datamoshing, which erratically dissolves the pixels of each composition into the next. The result is an ebb and flow of bodies and movement enfolding in an immersive expanded cinema environment. This disrupts traditional filmic techniques and linear storytelling in order to subvert expectations of discrete representations of human and non-human bodies. The video has no fixed duration and the installation offers a space to wander, sit on marble-dyed bodily shaped pillows, watch and listen.



Fig. 5. *Karst Composting*, installation process detail, 2019.

*Gardens & Grottoes* is spatially and temporally open and inviting of engagement. Climbing holds, head lamps and upside-down plants invoke movement and provide opportunities to cross the threshold into relational space where awareness of interconnection is made possible.

Both the grotto and karst system offer a site for speculating about the porous assemblage of bodies. Traditionally a metaphor for the cosmos, the cave is a locus for a poetic contemplation of the self in relation to place.<sup>6</sup> As an elusive art form intermingling painting, sculpture, installation, water and light play, the garden grotto has potential to push

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<sup>6</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. A. T. Murray (London: London Heinemann, 1919), 9. Caves are prominent throughout *The Odyssey* as sacred sites of the gods.

not only disciplinary boundaries, but to also refigure the *nature versus culture* motif. This thesis responds to two main questions:

How can my installation practice facilitate a heightened awareness of the more-than-human? How can the metaphors of the garden and the grotto be reimagined, via installation practice to offer new ways of *becoming with*<sup>7</sup> that are part of ecological reciprocity?

Within this interdisciplinary investigation, I use the language and intersectional framework of material feminisms and feminist posthumanisms to counter the harmful hierarchies of *humanism*<sup>8</sup> and emphasize the vitality of the material world. Additionally, as a woman of settler ancestry, indigenous epistemologies of the land provide important perspectives contrasting the colonial narratives of *nature*. This work is relevant to the fields of contemporary feminist philosophy, critical geography and interdisciplinary studies.

My thesis investigates the conceptual opening of subjectivity in order to live within the complexities of our anthropogenically-disturbed

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<sup>7</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 183-201, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3178066>; Stacy Alaimo, "Your Shell on Acid," in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 89-120.

<sup>8</sup> Humanism is the dominant conceptual framework which centres on the supremacy of the individual, scientific method and human rationality. Adopted by Renaissance artists and scholars from Greek and Roman traditions, these principles laid the foundation for theoretically ordering the world into hierarchical categories and systems.

worlds. Theorist Stacy Alaimo in *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* "Your Shell on Acid," proposes an immersed and enmeshed conception of humans within the world in order to counter the dominant representations of the *Anthropocene*, which separate people from the material realm.<sup>9</sup> Karen Barad's article "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter" challenges a static conception of matter and *nature* by presenting a feminist quantum physics framework where subjects and objects never existed as independent entities, but have always been actively interconnected prior to artificial separation.<sup>10</sup> Barad presents an iterative, ongoing and relational conception of reality which embraces relationships of simultaneous interior and exterior space. This complicates the position of human identity and the humanist tendency to define things and objects as separate entities. As convex and concave, inside and outside space muddied within the subterranean aesthetics of the grotto

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<sup>9</sup> Alaimo, "Your Shell on Acid," 103.

<sup>10</sup> Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 815, DOI:10.1086/345321.

installation, a rich compost for wondering about creaturely entanglements emerges.

My thesis exhibition seeks to disrupt the framing of *nature* evident in representationalism by drawing out intimate interminglings with more-than-human beings through movement and multisensory installation. It acknowledges the contradictions inherent in presenting and representing dynamically alive beings and processes, and seeks out the possibilities for refiguring engagement with, and as part of the more-than-human. Haptic sensing is privileged, through bodily movement and intimate proximity to sensorial works. For audiences, this bodily engagement activates a contemplation of deep time and more-than-human agencies, and reverses the deanimating narratives of organisms and ecologies in art.

## 1.2 SUBSTRATUM

My experiences as an artist, educator and cinematographer inform the research and creation of this interdisciplinary body of work. Earning my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Film Production and Studio Art at York University in 2009, my work with film has led to the creation of a female-run outdoor adventure media company, production of environmental documentaries



and adventure tourism video projects. My painting practice has afforded me the opportunity of being the spring 2016 Artist-in-Residence at Algonquin Provincial Park and attending residencies at Artscape Gibraltar Point, the Canadian Wilderness Artist Residency in Yukon and Can Serrat International Art Centre in Barcelona, Spain. An intrinsic pull towards being physically outside has motivated these endeavors, with my ongoing focus being my evolving concept of *nature*. From plein air painting to combining drawing with rock climbing and guiding outdoor art trips, biophilic fascination was at the fore of my artistic projects.



Fig. 6. *Transformations, process*, tempera on paper, 16 x 11 ft. 2019.

As a secondary school educator, sharing these moments of connection motivated meditative art walks and enabled me to better accommodate multiple intelligences. This attuned my approaches to multisensory learning and the restorative effects of outdoor environments. The multimodal approaches in *Gardens & Grottoes* simultaneously seeks to connect with different learning styles while offering opportunities for engagement typically associated with outdoor spaces.

Biologist Edward O. Wilson coined the term *biophilia*<sup>11</sup> to describe the phenomenon of human affinity toward non-human living beings. In today's post-industrial, technologically-driven society, *biophilic*, or *nature-based* activities like forest immersion and garden therapy are on the rise for the physiological and psychological benefits on human health.<sup>12</sup> While activities like hiking, camping or gardening can lead to greater valuing of more-than-human ecosystems, my concerns are twofold: firstly, that

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<sup>11</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Stephen Kellert and Edward O. Wilson, *The Biophilia Hypothesis* (Washington: Island Press, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Bjørn Grinde and Grete Grindal Patil, "Biophilia: Does Visual Contact with Nature Impact on Health and Well-Being?" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 6, no. 9 (September 2009): 2332-43, DOI:10.3390/ijerph6092332.; Qing Li, "Effect of Forest Bathing Trips on Human Immune Function," *Environmental Health and Preventative Medicine* 15, no. 1 (January 2010): 9-17, DOI:10.1007/s12199-008-0068-3.

Wilson's emphasis on biotic life marginalizes the sentience of "inanimate matter" such as rocks and soils,<sup>13</sup> and secondly, that the prescribing of a *nature fix* for human health would lead to yet another form of objectifying and commodifying our more-than-human world through consumption and leisure. Even Wilson's *biophilia hypothesis* takes on a not-so-subtle anthropocentric and colonial tone: "nature must be mastered, but (we hope) never completely".<sup>14</sup>

In response to both the limitations and potential of Wilson's *biophilia hypothesis* to cultivate a sense of affective<sup>15</sup> response-ability,<sup>16</sup> my art-based inquiry since entering OCAD University's Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design program seeks to subvert colonial ways of knowing to open perceptions through multi-sensory embodiment and the aesthetic blurring of bodies. Rather than reinforcing human separation

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<sup>13</sup> Wilson, *Biophilia*, 84. Wilson claims that abiotic life is only valuable if it "can be metabolized into live tissue," accidentally resembles biotic life, or can be fashioned into useful artifacts.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," in *Culture Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 83-109. Massumi articulates affect as being an intrinsic bodily response that is prior to emotion and thought processing. It is an open-ended threshold space in bodily processing.

<sup>16</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), 105. Haraway's term "response-ability" does not describe an individualistic, humanist obligation to one's actions, but rather a "praxis of care and response" within our "ongoing multispecies worlding."

from, and dominance over, other biotic and abiotic agencies, my work seeks to muddy human forms within and as part of figurations of non/inhuman beings through the mediums of paint, sculpture and video.



Fig. 7. *Earthing*, installation detail, winterstone, acrylic paint, homegrown crystals, 2018.

In the second semester of my MFA, I sculpted *Earthing*, a pair of blue painted feet with homegrown crystals sedimented within and on the surface. This work is about the phenomenon of grounding, which is the practice of receiving health benefits from direct contact with the earth's electrical energy. Another project from this semester is the reclaimed climbing rope cocoons I wove for meditative sitting and swinging. *Chrysalis I and II* are bodily and grotto-like in their form and enveloping function. Along with contemplation of forms, I want to invite people to communicate with the works through their senses and whenever possible,

offer opportunities for nestling, climbing, and crawling. As a continuation of this research, the goal of *Gardens & Grottoes* is to offer a site for immanent experimentation, intimacy and potentially expanded notions of self in relationship with the space.



Fig. 8. *Chrysalis I*, installation detail, retired rock climbing rope, 2018.

My participation in the Murmur Land Studios residency field school, *Unruly Infolding: Reconsidering Naturecultures*, which took place at Miguasha National Park, Gaspé Peninsula, Quebec in July 2018, profoundly impacted the research and methodology of this thesis. This non-hierarchical, camping-based field school follows a research-creation event design adopted in 2013 from Brian Massumi and Erin Manning's

SenseLab project.<sup>17</sup> Facilitation approaches like “enabling constraints” instead of “frameworks,” “propositions” rather than “instructions” and “relational movement” instead of “participation” set the tone for improvisational explorations within the field school event and modeled how to create conditions that “animate the threshold of a potential activity rather than defining the breadth of the activity itself.”<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, the palaeontological site of Miguasha National Park contains significant fossil specimens from the Devonian Period. This activated my interest in human-lithic relations, which are the naturecultural collisions of human and inhuman found in new layers of strata, the creation of technofossils such as concrete, oil extraction practices, carbon emissions, composting of bodies intermingled in the rocks and Paleolithic cave paintings. This fuels my questioning around the intermixing of bodies in this current epoch some call the *Anthropocene*, a theoretical category

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<sup>17</sup> Brian Massumi and Erin Manning, “Senselab.” 2004, <http://senselab.ca/wp2/>. Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 92.

<sup>18</sup> “Unruly Infolding: Reconsidering Naturecultures,” *Murmur Land Studios* (self-pub., 2018), 13. <https://murmurlandstudios.net>.

debated as the term for our current geological epoch where man is considered the dominant *geologic force*.<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 9. *Tentacular Traces*, installation detail, Murmur Land Studios field school, 2018.

During this thesis project, I have come to a new level of understanding myself as embodied, yet porous, entwined with other existences and simultaneously interior and exterior. At the time of the creation of this interdisciplinary body of work and the writing of this paper, my husband and I conceived, experienced pregnancy for half of the first trimester, and then sadly miscarried. While not an intended part of my research, it has heavily impacted my evolving sense of self and my own intimate, ongoing connections with other existences and environments. Despite being told that miscarriage is no one's fault, I have a heightened criticality of things

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<sup>19</sup> Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene,'" *IGBP: A Study of Global Change*, no. 41 (May 2000): 17.

like the materials I work with, the food and beverage I consume, the environmental emissions and invisible pollutants I am exposed to. Additionally, I have a different relationship with my body as its capacity to carry or reject an extension of itself is beyond my control. I carry these sensitivities with me and they inform the creation of this work and my art practice going forward.

### 1.3 SUBTERRANEAN

Conceptual propositions for making flow out of my personal experiences with ecological happenings and the entwining of myself in space. I use the term *happening* to refer to an event taking place that invites open-ended engagement and points of connection. These moments of deep connectivity and vulnerability take place when I am immersed in and enmeshed with my environment. In rock climbing, this is the sensation of wedging my body into a limestone crack on the side of a cliff, feeling both a bodily closeness and fierce exposure to the open air and porous rock around me. In pursuit of this tension in my thesis research, I chose caves and garden grottos because they were initially less familiar to me and hold powerful affective qualities which I have



experienced personally. The combination of repulsion and seduction that I sense when entering both artificial grotto assemblages and the karst cave ecosystem motivates my curiosity and desire, pushing me out of my comfort zone and into these threshold spaces.

The tension I feel when entering a garden grotto composed of sculptural and painted grotesques,<sup>20</sup> harvested coral and shells, marble sculpture, remnants of water features and picturesque paintings comes from a disjuncture between artifice and living flora and fauna. This immersive play between simulacra, living flora and once-living fauna (coral) both attract and repel me. An assemblage of bodies takes place within the garden grotto with water play, algae, mosses and an interdisciplinary mixing of material and forms. Along the Buontalenti grotto walls are uncanny sculptures of human, goat, dog and landscape forms. These are composed from coral, shell, mosaic and concrete that water would have trickled down during the High Renaissance and Baroque periods. Despite the prolific representation of porous bodies

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<sup>20</sup> Naomi Miller, *Heavenly Caves: Reflections of the Garden Grotto* (New York: G. Braziller, 1982), 10. Grottoes are associated with the *grotesque* after the capricious ornaments of hybrid creatures decorating Nero's Golden House were inadvertently found during the Renaissance. These ornamentations were adopted by sixteenth century artists and continue to shape conceptions of classical art and garden features to this day.

throughout grottos like the Buontalenti, they are often anchored in the humanist tradition, intended as a showcase of man's power through artistry and theatrical spectacle.

The prolific use of marble in Renaissance grottos was modeled after classical discoveries such as Nero's palace in Rome. This incredibly important imperial resource showcased man's ability not only to quarry from various conquered regions, but to transport massive blocks over vast distances of land.<sup>21</sup> The *Gardens & Grottoes* exhibition weaves the marble motif throughout soft sculptures and trompe-l'œil paintings to simultaneously subvert the long-standing status symbol, and the ironic continuation of it in popular art and design aesthetics today.

In reflecting on Renaissance naturecultural entanglements in literature and art, Deborah Amberson and Elena Past quote theorist Rosi Braidotti for her appeal to move beyond humanist condescension, which she terms the "bioegalitarian turn."<sup>22</sup> In "Animals, Anomalies and Inorganic Others," Braidotti describes this turn as a "radical

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<sup>21</sup> *Nero's Golden House*, directed by Phil Grabsky, (2001; Seventh Art Productions), Film.

<sup>22</sup> Deborah Amberson and Elena Past. *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 3.

repositioning” of and by the human subject in order to “bypass the metaphysics of substance and its corollary, the dialectics of otherness.”<sup>23</sup>

As I pursue this radical repositioning in my art-based practice, I want to facilitate immersive experiences that activate physical movement and sensorial engagement in ways that foster visions of complexity and inclusion of otherness. In my thesis research, this has led me to push through my own deeply-sedimented othering of cave spaces where a very different kind of abject experience is foregrounded for me. A visceral rejection of confined, dark and disorienting spaces and the beings that live there, would overwhelm me at the thought of descending into a hole in the ground. Crawling on my belly in a tunnel two-feet tall by three-feet wide, with my back bumping against the bulbous spidery bodies and the dripping ceiling of the cave was not how I imagined undertaking my thesis research. However, I found my fear, sense precarity and lack of control to be a crucial part of my investigation. I came to know this vulnerability extended beyond my immediate physical insecurity, to the very urgent visible and invisible ecological imbalances at play in the karst.

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<sup>23</sup> Rosi Braidotti, “Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others,” *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (March 2009): 526, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25614294>.

Evidence of this was apparent as I was crawling through beer bottles and plastic bags mixed in with sticks, mud and water. As a forest drainage system, the cave filters debris from the hiking trails and surrounding suburban development sites.

Further dispelling my imagined separation of the cave from human culture, I draw from Silvia Frisia and Ian Fairchild's charting of the geochemical records archived in the formation stalagmites to highlight pollution levels and potential boundary markers for our anthropogenically-disturbed time.<sup>24</sup> Similar markers of human presence, such as people's names, are scrawled onto the lichen covered walls of the Nexus Cave in Eramosa Karst. As faint reminders of Paleolithic cave paintings they mark human consciousness of self in relationship to place. This vernacular mark-making supports my inquiry into paint's ability to refigure conceptions of *nature* that is inclusive of oneself.

In a cave, experiential knowing through scent, sound and touch are often privileged over sight. As I crawled and climbed through Eramosa

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<sup>24</sup> Ian J. Fairchild and Silvia Frisia, "Definition of the Anthropocene: A View from the Underworld," *Geological Society* 395 (May 2014): 239, DOI:10.1144/SP395.7.

Karst, my mind battled ominous thoughts of getting stuck, the tunnel collapsing or encountering creepy cave creatures. Psychologically, my proposition to myself was to let go of these varying degrees of rationality and prejudice in order to embrace the many bodies of the karst space. This evolved into a video performance where I covered myself in mud and forest runoff before climbing the walls and ceiling of the cave. This process simultaneously heightened my self-consciousness and acutely attuned my attention to the porous surfaces, gritty textures, reverberating sounds, and dank earthy smells. As headlamps panned light across the cave, cameras operated by my best friend Franziska Brand, sister-in-law Miriam Carlson and husband Bruce Carlson recorded my camouflaged body surrounded by limestone strata. To further muddy forms, and complicate platonic rationalist conceptions of "above" and "below" earth, I intercut this footage and then datamoshed it with video of the lush karst forest. Datamoshing corrupts video files in ways that are unexpected and difficult to control. This collaboration with technology further decentres my human agency while dissolving representations of bodies in playful and surprising ways.

The dynamic movement and blurring of more-than-human bodies present in both the garden grotto and karst cave system compose the substratum of my art-based research. The interdisciplinary inmixing of materials, movement and forms is a result of these separate, but theoretically linked cavernous spaces. Through these different material approaches, including sculpture, painting, video and installation, *Gardens & Grottoes* functions simultaneously as an interior and exterior space. Incorporating living materials and drawing on karst cave attributes, it collapses distinctions between nature and culture, self and other, and human and more-than-human.



Fig. 10. *Karst Composting*, video still, datamoshed video, 2019.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

And after having remained at the entry some time, two contrary emotions arose in me, fear and desire – fear of the threatening dark grotto, desire to see whether there were marvelous things within it.  
- Leonardo da Vinci<sup>25</sup>

A site of simultaneous interior-exteriority, *Gardens & Grottoes* references a cave space, both as an artificial garden feature and as a vital subterranean ecosystem. In *Heavenly Caves: Reflections on the Garden Grotto*, Naomi Miller traces the ancient and varied tradition of the grotto and observes that “from Homer to Joyce the grotto has been the locus of mysterious forces, of unanswered questions, of states of being and becoming...”<sup>26</sup> In this section, I critique humanist discourses present in the aestheticization of a conceived *nature* and investigate the concept of *becoming* as an alternative to reductionist framings of dynamic beings and processes. Material feminist and feminist posthuman notions of performativity and trans-corporeality<sup>27</sup> infuse this sense of *becoming*

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<sup>25</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, *Codex Arundel* 155r, 1452-1509. Leonardo Da Vinci, *Notebooks: Oxford World's Classics*, trans. Jean Paul Richter, ed. Thereza Wells (1952; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 247.

<sup>26</sup> Miller, *Heavenly Caves*, 123.

<sup>27</sup> Stacy Alaimo, “Your Shell on Acid,” in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 89-120. This is a central concept in my research into the reimagining *nature* and simultaneous opening up of human subjectivities. I discuss this term in depth in the following section.

embedded in the form and meaning of the grotto space. These efforts to upturn fixed subjectivity within a cavernous context are bolstered by Luce Irigaray's feminist reading of Plato's cave in *Speculum of the Other Woman*.<sup>28</sup> Her play with optics, orientation and origin, as well as her ironic use of masculine discourse to expose Western philosophy's construction of truth (and subjectivity) inspires the interdisciplinary intermixing of terrestrial and subterranean bodies within the installation.

The queering of ecological politics and cultivation of alternative "modes of embodiment, attention, imagination, and new ways of telling stories about lands and bodies" is central in the artistic collaboration of Natasha Myers and Ayelen Liberona and is of great resonance with my work.<sup>29</sup> In "Ungrid-able Ecologies: Decolonizing the Ecological Sensorium in a 10,000 year-old NatureCultural Happening" Myers and Liberona pull at time and light to blur bodies with environment, foreground movement and the "impossibility of disentangling nature from culture."<sup>30</sup> While

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<sup>28</sup> Luce Irigaray, "Plato's Hystera," in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (1974; repr., Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1985), 243-364.

<sup>29</sup> Natasha Myers, "Ungrid-able Ecologies: Decolonizing Ecological Sensorium in 10,000 year-old NatureCultural Happening," *Catalyst Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 3, no. 2 (2017): 22, <http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312.

<sup>30</sup> Myers, 13. Myers and Liberona utilize time-lapse photography to capture the dynamic movement of dance within and as part of the vital environment of High Park.



*Gardens & Grottoes* employs familiar modes of representing more-than-human forms, I also look to movement to complicate seemingly enclosed entities and to draw out the always already porous intermingling of phenomena. Not only is movement central in the datamoshed video where bodies are dynamically dissolved within a karst, but also in the participatory proposition for kinaesthetic movement, like climbing, meandering and crawling within the exhibition. Traces of movement are present within the material and composition of painting and at its most fundamental level, movement is trickling in the play of water fountains and in the vibrant life of the collaborating plants.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze critiques fixed representationalism for its single centre, "unique and receding perspective and in consequence a false depth."<sup>31</sup> He asserts that it "mediates everything, but mobilizes and moves nothing." By contrast, he stresses how movement "implies a plurality of centres, a superposition of perspectives, a tangle of points of view, a coexistence of moments which

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<sup>31</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 55-56.

essentially distort representation."<sup>32</sup> *Gardens & Grottoes* seeks to carry forward this critique of representation's static enclosing through dynamic participatory movement and blurring of seemingly singular phenomena. Along with tactile engagement, the work compositionally dissolves represented bodies and forms across recognizable materials and beings. In doing this, the exhibition acts as a grotto assemblage of disjointed forms and techniques in order to query familiar readings of painting, sculpture, video and the presence of plants (both living and represented), while simultaneously queering rigid constructions of self and more-than-human beings.

## 2.1 CULTIVATION

The collaboration with, and representation of living plants within cavernous aesthetics is intended to subvert conceptual separations around what is considered above and below the earth, while also playing on garden grotto motifs. Gardening can be an intimate activity of flourishing and care for more-than-human beings, yet throughout Western

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

art and architecture, gardens are complicated sites for politics and power.

In *Sowing an Empire: Landscape and Colonization*, Jill Casid identifies how mastery over *nature* is epitomized in cultivation and landscaping practices which are inextricably tied to the imperial imagination. The garden—as an extension of architecture—is a particular site of aestheticized *nature* whereby dominant powers impose order and preserve colonial-patriarchal establishment.<sup>33</sup> In his article, “Borderless Histories: The Botanical Art of Maria Thereza Alves,” Richard Hill quotes Edward Young’s eighteenth-century prose “On Pleasure,”<sup>34</sup> disclosing how a garden is not only:

“a promoter of a good man’s happiness, but a picture of it; and, in some sort, shows him to himself. Its culture, order, fruitfulness, and seclusion from the world, compared to the weeds, wildness, and exposure of a common field...A garden to the virtuous is a Paradise still extant, a Paradise unlost.”<sup>35</sup>

Hill considers how the art of Maria Thereza Alves addresses the naturecultural entanglement of colonial gardens and in particular the

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<sup>33</sup> Jill Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 45.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Young, “On Pleasure: The Centaur Not Fabulous,” in *The Complete Works, Poetry and Prose of the Rev. Edward Young* vol. 2, ed. John Doran (London: W. Tegg and Co., 1854), 446.

<sup>35</sup> Richard William Hill, “Borderless Histories: The Botanical Art of Maria Thereza Alves,” *Third Text* 32, no. 2-3 (July 2018): 10, DOI:10.1080/09528822.2018.1476048.

trafficking and “nativisation” of plants into the idea of “an English landscape.”<sup>36</sup>

By contrast, in “My Mother’s Garden: Aesthetics, Indigenous Renewal, and Creativity”, Laura Hall shares how the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee nations view a garden not in the possessive singular, but as the “soil, water, and air” moving towards the Great Lakes, nourishing the entire continent.<sup>37</sup> Hall’s intimate and reciprocal relationship with her family garden has informed my ability to take a step back and think critically about my own complicated cultural connections with gardens.

The artificial Edenic paradise is queried in *Gardens & Grottoes* through featuring grids of climbing English ivy along with other plants within unruly and unkempt cave aesthetics. These cultivated and commodified plants are ghostly agents that not only signal the therapeutic, nostalgic and colonial narratives associated with domestication of plants, but they also act to materially-discursively tangle human and non-human bodies within the work. The grotto as an

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Laura Hall, “My Mother’s Garden: Aesthetics, Indigenous Renewal and Creativity,” in *Art in the Anthropocene*, eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 283.

assemblage of forms, with ambivalent qualities and difficult to discern theoretical traditions is where I have chosen to locate my art-based investigation. Its inherent function as a metaphor for the universe, as well as its labyrinthian quality as a portal for wonder opens opportunities for play and subversion of the *nature versus art* motif.



Fig. 11. *Undergrowth: Touching Bodies*, winterstone, resin, moss, air plant, ivy, hair, 2019.

## 2.2 PICTURESQUE

Another primary tool for hegemonic mythologies of place and people is pictured during industrialization with the rise of landscape painting and the “development of the picturesque ‘as a way of seeing.’”<sup>38</sup> This

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<sup>38</sup> Casid, *Sowing Empire*, 13.

romantic transformation of land into landscape pulls on nostalgic, imaginary ideas of “virginal wilderness” used to rationalize the dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands in the US and Canada.<sup>39</sup> In meditating on Albert Bierstadt’s *Sunset in the Yosemite Valley*,<sup>40</sup> Wilson describes how “the dreamlike quality of the painting rolls time forward” and details an imaginary, primeval scene where “the valley, empty of people, is safe.”<sup>41</sup> This fictional portrayal of a virginal landscape fuels colonial and nationalist agendas by ignoring the presence of indigenous peoples.<sup>42</sup> While humanism laid this groundwork for painting’s “subduing of nature, laying the grid on chaos,” which is often conflated with ideas of femininity, in *Figure/Ground*, painter Mira Schor argues for a feminist reclaiming of paint that employs the wet, bodily attributes of paint to tell “the Other’s untold story.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hill, “Borderless Histories,” 8.

<sup>40</sup> Albert Bierstadt, *Sunset in the Yosemite Valley*, 1868. Oil on Canvas. Stockton, Haggin Museum.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson, *Biophilia*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Duane, “Goodbye, Yosemite. Hello, What?”, *The New York Times* (Sept 2, 2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/02/opinion/sunday/goodbye-yosemite-hello-what.html>. An estimated 300,000 people inhabited California before Spanish missionaries arrived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>43</sup> Mira Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (London, Duke University Press, 1997) 152.

Intermingled throughout *Gardens & Grottoes* are painterly renderings of ecosystems. The familiar framing of landscape painting serves as a point of departure into surreal, energetic and materially-engaged realms. Cave painting's role in the formation of subjectivity is theorized by Kathryn Yusoff in "Geologic Subjects: Nonhuman Origins, Geomorphic Aesthetics and the Art of Becoming *Inhuman*."<sup>44</sup> Yusoff discusses the *Birdman* hybrid figure of Lascaux as the "originary figure in human origins," along with living pigments of the *Gwion Gwion* rock art in Kimberley, Western Australia, to propose a queer genealogy of origins rather than a discrete, exceptional model of human subjectivity.<sup>45</sup> In an effort to continue this denaturalization of human-nature dualities, *Gardens & Grottoes* plays between elements of represented landscape, between figuration and abstraction, blurring visual boundaries, embracing liminality and opening up readings of subjectivity. Additionally, the sculptural characteristics of the paintings encourage haptic engagement where bodies can touch, penetrate and even climb the work. This project

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<sup>44</sup> Kathryn Yusoff, "Geologic Subjects: Nonhuman Origins, Geomorphic Aesthetics and the Art of Becoming *Inhuman*," *Cultural Geographies* 22, no. 3 (August 2014): 383-407, DOI: 10.1177/1474474014545301.

<sup>45</sup> Yusoff, 385.

proposes a move beyond the fixed objecthood of painting by enveloping the viewer to offer an immersive, vibrant experience, of which the human participant is intimately a part.

### 2.3 DISEMBODIED VISION

The dominant ideological project behind the aestheticization of non-human bodies into flat picturesque landscapes and curated gardens persists in today's prolific vision of the proposed *Anthropocene*. Despite the shift from the romantic idealization of landscape to sublime images of environmental destruction, these aestheticizations position a disembodied, Western conception of "man" as superior and safely removed from affected worlds.<sup>46</sup> Irmgard Emmelhainz articulates how "the hegemonic sight conventions of visuality is an empowered but unstable, free-falling and floating bird's eye view that mirrors this present moment's ubiquitous moment of groundlessness."<sup>47</sup> Donna Haraway

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<sup>46</sup> The Anthropocene exhibition and corresponding films by Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier at the AGO and the National Gallery of Canada from September 2018 to January 2019, aestheticizes anthropogenic destruction of our planet. The viewer is implicated in this event through various scale shifting techniques of photography, film and augmented reality.

<sup>47</sup> Irmgard Emmelhainz, "Images Do Not Show: The Desire to See in the Anthropocene," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and*



refers to this technological mediation as a “god-trick” that is “simultaneously celebrated and presented as utterly transparent.”<sup>48</sup>

Within the exhibition, the projected video of the karst ecosystem emphasizes the construction of the technological apparatus through foregrounding digital pixels while simultaneously composting compositions of human and non-human bodies together.

Within *Karst Composting*, the movement of bodies, along with camera techniques of panning, tracking and tilting, compositionally create the data corruption by lagging pixels during playback. This foregrounds the technological apparatus and the partiality of human perspective in cinematography and editing choices. Projecting the video onto sculpted stalactite hanging planters further distorts the images with the goal of implicating the viewer within their timespace, while extending the messy naturecultural entanglements around us. This diffracted depiction of biotic and abiotic compositions inspires the weaving of terrestrial animal

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*Epistemologies*, eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 137.

<sup>48</sup> Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 183-201, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3178066>, 582.

and botanical forms with subterranean geologic figurations throughout the *Gardens & Grottoes* installation.

## 2.4 BECOMING

In her chapter, "Your Shell on Acid," Stacy Alaimo proposes that in order to "counter the dominant figurations of the Anthropocene, which abstract the human from the material realm and obscure differentials of responsibility and harm," we need to consider "the Anthropocene subject as immersed and enmeshed in the world."<sup>49</sup> She highlights the necessity of assemblage theory in articulating the different and contingent compositions of human, non-human, technical and systemic entanglements at play. This involves not only a shifting of representational scales to implicate specific relationships and culpability, but also a complete reconsideration of a discrete human identity altogether. She terms this concept "trans-corporeality," and describes it as a porosity of boundaries between human and non-human bodies. This

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<sup>49</sup> Alaimo, 103.

includes not only a corporeal intermingling with biological, chemical and climactic processes, but also geological ones.<sup>50</sup>

In "Anthropogenesis: Origins and Endings in the Anthropocene," Yusoff speculates on the mineralogical dimensions of human composition and argues that the collision of human and inhuman<sup>51</sup> histories requires a lithic subjectivity that "redefines temporal, material and spatial orders of the human (and thus nature)."<sup>52</sup> This sense of immersion and comingling is central to Cree scholar Dwayne Donald's teaching on "ethical relationality" as detailed in Zoe Todd's "Indigenizing the Anthropocene."<sup>53</sup> Rooted in what he describes as our "ecological imagination," it is about paying attention to the webs of relationships we are enmeshed in.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, this ethic embraces multiple time scales in holding that "the past occurs simultaneously in the present and influences how we conceptualize the future."<sup>55</sup> In engaging with the

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<sup>50</sup> Alaimo, 106.

<sup>51</sup> The term "inhuman" is defined as that which is not human in nature or character. Used by Kathryn Yusoff as it relates to nonorganic dimensions of life.

<sup>52</sup> Kathryn Yusoff, "Anthropogenesis: Origins and Endings of the Anthropocene," *Theory, Culture and Society* 33, no. 2 (April 2015): 3, DOI:10.1177/0263276415581021.

<sup>53</sup> Zoe Todd, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 249.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Todd, 250.

temporal and material contractions of our time, Yusoff conceptualizes ecologies of subjectivities in an effort to abandon the assumption of discrete, auto-poetic identity-making.

This continuous formation of subjectivity in relationship with the world is embodied in the thinking of Karen Barad. Her 2003 essay “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” elaborates on feminist notions of becoming<sup>56</sup> through a quantum physics lens, with her relational framework of “Agential Realism”; here, subjects and objects have never existed as independent entities, but have always been actively interconnected prior to their artificial separation.<sup>57</sup> She refers to this network of “phenomena” in the world as “intra-action”—the ongoing process of mutual creation, where boundaries and categories exist only in specific contextual (material and discursive) relationships.<sup>58</sup> Barad brings our attention to how matter, like

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<sup>56</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 810. Barad expands upon Judith Butler’s notion of bodies acting out a gender, by considering the involvement of “all bodies” and their entanglement of matter and discourse in the formation of meaning. Pulling from her quantum-physics background, Barad applies the feminist and queer theory concept of performativity - the active participation in the creation of language and being, to the scientific world of matter and the non-human.

<sup>57</sup> Barad, 815.

<sup>58</sup> Barad, 817. This is different from *interaction* which assumes the previous separation of entities that are engaging with one another.

meaning, is “not a fixed substance,” and that all bodies (not merely human bodies) “come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity – its performance.”<sup>59</sup> The implication of Barad’s argument is that “humans” refer to “phenomena,” rather than singular entities with inherent properties and that the boundaries between “human” and non-human stabilize and destabilize in particular material reconfigurings.<sup>60</sup> The posthumanist, materialist account of performativity proposed by Barad challenges the positioning of matter as a mere effect of human agency and *nature* as a passive surface “awaiting the mark of culture.”<sup>61</sup> The shared action of creating reality through relationships of simultaneous interior and exterior spaces, complicates the position of human identity, and with it, the entire Western tendency to define things and objects as pre-existing separate entities.

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<sup>59</sup> Barad, 822-23.

<sup>60</sup> Barad, 818.

<sup>61</sup> Barad, 827.



Fig. 12. *Karst Composting*, video still, datamoshed video, 2019.

## 2.5 COMPOST

As I traverse the mythical separation of what is above and what is below the earth to challenge the separation of humans from a statically framed nature, I look to Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Her stories from the earth help to undo Western philosophy's "human exceptionalism and bounded individualism" while refiguring webs of relations.<sup>62</sup> Rather than "Anthropocene," she offers the "Chthulucene" to conceptualize our precarious and muddled time. This compound of two Greek roots: "khthon" referring to mud and "of the muck," and "kainos" meaning now, are driving concepts in my

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<sup>62</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 30.

interdisciplinary storying of a timespace for humans to conceive of themselves as geologic and of the earth.<sup>63</sup> Tracing ancient mythologies of gorgons like Medusa, Zeus' daughter Persephone and other beings from the underworld, Haraway imagines "chthonic ones" as being "replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair."<sup>64</sup> These unheroic, spidery creatures with their multiple appendages are useful figures for imagining our intermingling of bodies within space, time and matter. Haraway also suggests "compost" instead of "posthuman(ism)" and "human as humus" to revise subjectivity and emphasize collaborative becoming.<sup>65</sup> This muddy entanglement is the stimulus for my art-based investigations into karst cave and grotto bodies. The interdisciplinary painting, sculpture, installation and video of *Gardens & Grottoes* intermingles skin, rock, water, mud, root, web and exoskeleton, while playing with light, shadow and movement throughout. Rather than an individualistic self-making, the works investigate what

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<sup>63</sup> Haraway, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Haraway, 31.

Haraway terms “sym-poiesis,” a collaborative becoming where living (and dying) well with other critters can be sought after.<sup>66</sup>

Through physical movement, sensorial immersion and the privileging of ambiguous bodily forms, *Gardens and Grottoes* seeks to illuminate overlapping gray areas of agency and challenge hierarchical *nature-human* binaries. Rather than distancing naturalistic and natural forms through a glass display, frame or screen, intimate interactions with more-than-human bodies are facilitated through sensorial play. The cavernous garden grotto aesthetic offers a diffracted-depiction of what Barad describes as a world not composed of “things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but things-in-phenomena.”<sup>67</sup>



Fig. 13. *Karst Composting*, video still, datamoshed video, 2019.

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<sup>66</sup> Haraway, 58.

<sup>67</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 817.



## METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 EMBEDDED PONDERING

Thinking with my body, materials and above all, with matter propels my engagement with artistic projects. In "Textility of Making," Tim Ingold elaborates on the wayfaring skills of the practitioner working with materials in finding "the grain of the world's becoming and to follow its course while bending it to their evolving purpose."<sup>68</sup> Ingold cites Deleuze and Guattari for their conceiving of "matter in movement, in flux, in variation" which as a matter-flow, can only be followed.<sup>69</sup> This essential relation between materials and forces, argued by Deleuze and Guattari, and taken up by Ingold, summarizes my artistic investigation and ongoing inquiry into interconnectivity.

While I consider the corporeal materiality of my body, as it exists in dynamic relationship with surrounding bodies (rocks, water, plants, animals, paint, canvas...etc.) to be a main locus for this investigation, throughout the creation of *Gardens & Grottoes* I sought to follow this

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<sup>68</sup> Tim Ingold, "Textility of Making," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34, no. 1 (July 2009): 92, DOI:10.1093/cje/bep042.

<sup>69</sup> Ingold, 94; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), 451.

matter-flow by minimizing my intervention at various points in order to foreground collaboration with material agencies beyond my own. The materiality of painting spills into each constructed cave space as textures vary, pigments bleed together and substrate surfaces shift in order to oscillate between representation and abstraction. Living plants and reused sod from a landscape design show are important collaborators in *Gardens & Grottoes* and significantly impact engagement and care in the work. The technological agents of a projector, computer, camera and editing software reproduce and abstract video of Eramosa Karst through file corruption in order to materially-discursively mash together recognizable forms and bodies. The use of found objects and recycled materials in the way of retired climbing rope, a geodesic climbing set and old urethane rock climbing holds greatly shape the formal qualities and experience of the installation. To be consistent with eco-materialist feminist approaches, I have made every effort to consider the sustainability of my practice and whenever possible, repurpose or employ biodegradable materials.

My art-based methodology involves responding to different material combinations and conceptual-aesthetic possibilities as a practice

of embedded pondering. By embracing a trans-corporeal conception of subjectivity, I conceive the region of my body and all of its sensory functions as offering methods for perceiving and translating complex in-mixing of material agencies and relationships. My recent experience with pregnancy and miscarriage has opened up my perceptions of self in unexpected ways. I now have a deepened understanding of my body as an environment, capable of creating something healthy and viable, or taking the necessary steps to preserve itself. This feeds into my auto-ethnographic research which is guided by ongoing self-reflexivity and attention to shifting formations of subjectivity through situated embodiment.<sup>70</sup>

In experimenting with porous conceptions of self, by crawling into a local karst cave, removing my protective spelunking apparel and covering myself in mud and forest runoff, I disidentified with anthropocentric habits of thought and doing. As I opened myself up to

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<sup>70</sup> Feminist embodiment is an objectivity based on limited location and situated knowledges. Donna Haraway, in "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988) argues for partial perspective that acknowledges specific positioning. Objectivity can be achieved through transparency in partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity.

the cold, damp and dark body of the cave, a heightened sense of relationality took over. The DSLR video translated my actions as I intuitively sought out places for my body in the dolostone, limestone rock and slime. Braidotti, in "Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism," discloses how "becoming-earth (geocentered) or becoming-imperceptible...entails a radical break from established patterns of thought (naturalization) and introduces a radically immanent relational dimension."<sup>71</sup> As a kind of meditation on 'becoming-with' or 'being-with' as opposed to surveying-from a safe distance,<sup>72</sup> this experimental performative work provides the basis for my proposition of embodied precarity that lays at the heart of *Gardens & Grottoes*.

### 3.2 EMBODIED PRECARIETY

Stemming from my experiences rock climbing is an effort to facilitate intuitive, bodily movement with the sculpted forms and living plants. In climbing outdoors, within caves, and artificial rock climbing gyms, I have experienced both affective states of consciousness where my senses are

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<sup>71</sup> Rosi Braidotti, "Four Thesis on Posthuman Feminism," in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2017), 30.

<sup>72</sup> Haraway, *Situated Knowledges*, 189.

heightened and my awareness of self fades, as well as moments of extreme self-consciousness and precarity. In a cave, sensorial knowing through scent, sound and touch are often privileged over sight. As a method, *embodied precarity* offers a destabilizing of human security in order to open up speculative modes of attention. The intention behind the climbable works is to allow the audience to play with affective states of awareness and bodily immersion.

In an interview with *National Geographic*, the late free solo rock climber and base jumper Dean Potter said that the “pursuit of heightened awareness” and a feeling of connectivity was the reason behind his climbing practice.<sup>73</sup> In recounting his speed solo of Yosemite’s Half Dome, Potter shared his focused connection with the rock, attention to the delicateness of his existence, and his mantra “I’m invisible, I’m invisible, I’m invisible...”<sup>74</sup> This form of embodied knowledge is developed in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* which he describes as a kind of inverse relationship of self in one’s

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<sup>73</sup> Dean Potter, interview by Avery Stonich, “Climber Dean Potter on Valley Uprising, the Art of No Rules,” *National Geographic*, September 24, 2014.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/adventure-blog/2014/09/24/climber-dean-potter-on-valley-uprising-the-art-of-no-rules/>

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

environment.<sup>75</sup> Forgetting one's own corporeality in the act of perceiving, through sensing an invitation to act from the environment, one imbues these spaces with movement and bodily significance.<sup>76</sup> As a method of *embedded pondering*, *embodied precarity* facilitates the release of control and an openness to unexpected outcomes.

### 3.3 MOVEMENT

Merleau-Ponty describes movement and place (what he terms as "background") as "moments of a unique totality" where the "background to the movement is not a representation associated or linked externally with the movement itself, but is immanent in the movement inspiring and sustaining it at every moment."<sup>77</sup> Movement is a method woven throughout the artwork of *Gardens & Grottoes* which serves to blur more-than-human bodies conceptually and physically. As plants climb up walls and grow out of sculptural nooks, opportunities for touching and even climbing the works are made available for the audience to collaborate

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<sup>75</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, ed. Kegan Paul (New York: Routledge, 1945), 158.

<sup>76</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 67; 159.

<sup>77</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 127.

body-kinaesthetically. In *The Three Ecologies*, Félix Guattari elaborates on assemblages of dynamic subjectivities formed through multifaceted movement, deploying agencies and contingent relationships rather than a reductionist “refolding of interiority.”<sup>78</sup> He calls this reordering of self in relation to the world “resingularisation” and in *Chaosmosis*, Guattari describes how access to “new materials of expression” enables this ongoing reconfiguration of identity, which people participate in everyday.<sup>79</sup> Movement as a method is the passage of materials in their coming-together in my sculptural, paint and installation work, as well as the invitation to touch, climb, crawl and meander through the *Gardens & Grottoes*. It is a proposition to express oneself physically in hopes of facilitating the refiguring of self in relationship to space and others.

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<sup>78</sup> Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 67.

<sup>79</sup> Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 7.



Fig. 14. *Surface Bodies*, winterstone, resin, bolts, t-nuts, washers, plywood, screws, 2018.

### 3.4 CARE

As both a method and central motive, care drives all levels of this art-based investigation. Inspired by Puig de la Bellacasa's attention to human-soil relations in *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds, Gardens & Grottoes* pursues a desire to see from the depths. Bellacasa exposes soil as a living world created through a combination of the geological deep-time, break-down of rock, and the "relatively shorter ecological cycles by which organisms and plants, as well as humans growing food, decompose materials that contribute to the



topsoil.”<sup>80</sup> She shares how communities that care for soil acknowledge soil’s capacity to reciprocate and “take care” of the (human) “carer.”<sup>81</sup> Additionally, Puig de la Bellacasa highlights how care often involves intense affective relations and notes intimate haptic engagements such as the touching, sniffing and even tasting of soil by some organic farmers in the UK.<sup>82</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa looks to Astrid Schrader’s “Abyssal Intimacies and Temporalities of Care: How (Not) to Care about Deformed Leaf Bugs in the Aftermath of Chernobyl” in considering how “abyssal intimacy does not require recognition, but describes a creative engagement that relies on the withdrawal of self, a passivity that enables an active listening, an opening to surprises.”<sup>83</sup> Applied to my work, this method of attuning led to heightened sensing of the subterranean critters, contours of the limestone and seeping pools of water at the same time that I withdrew all forms of “sensible” human engagement. Care is in

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<sup>80</sup> Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 176.

<sup>81</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, 192.

<sup>82</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, 197.

<sup>83</sup> Astrid Schrader, “Abyssal Intimacies and Temporalities of Care: How (not) to Care about Deformed Leaf Bugs in the Aftermath of Chernobyl,” *Social Studies of Science* 45, no. 5 (September 2015): 673. DOI:10.1177/0306312715603249.

my desire to intimately know and be known by entities and materials surrounding me.

## CONCLUSION

### 4.1 SIFTING & SURFACING

*Gardens & Grottoes* is a naturecultural event that celebrates an enmeshing of more-than-human bodies while traversing mythical separations of above and below the surface of the earth. As an assemblage of materials and disciplines, it seeks to refigure deanimating representations of subjectivities. In this body of work, I address my affective experiences in the Buontalenti Grotto and Eramosa Karst environments as well as my investigation into permeable perceptions of self within ecologies by opening up opportunities for kinaesthetic engagement. Within the material feminist, and feminist posthumanist theoretical frameworks, I have created an interdisciplinary body of work that addresses *nature* in art through the ongoing process of *becoming-with*. As I combine my art practice with my interests in immersive ecosystems of assemblage, my thesis seeks to move beyond the border

work of hybridity and interspecies relationships, to consider the transcorporeal, expanded interfacing of bodies.

As I further my art practice, I continue to meditate on my shifting sense of self in complex relationships with other beings. Of lasting resonance for me is my fascination with both karst caves and artificial garden grottoes. These naturecultural spaces hold great potential for future art-based research around subjectivity and I expect to return to these sites in future painting, video, sculpture and installation projects. An area I would especially like to explore further is the role of painting in refiguring conceptions of self within ecologies. *Gardens & Grottoes* sought to subvert techniques of the *picturesque* by projecting onto painted landscapes and by encouraging the audience to touch and climb these figurations. In future investigations, I intend to interrogate painting more directly through material application and composition itself.

By situating these interdisciplinary works within a garden grotto installation, I invite people to consider their own physical proximity and relationship with this enveloping, multisensory work. By combining a variety of materials, artistic techniques and recognizable bodily forms, the installation prompts sensorial engagement, mobility and response from

viewers. These artworks come out of a methodology of *embedded pondering* involving an informed, intuitive thinking through making. This includes embodied forms of knowing, openness to vulnerability, persistent movement and care. The intermingling of bodies through paint, sculpture, video and installation elicit potential for affect and new embodied understandings of self within more-than-human worlds.

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## APPENDIX A

### THESIS EXHIBITION DETAILS



Fig. 15. *Gardens & Grottoes*, Exhibition Detail, 2019.



Fig. 16. *Passages*, installation detail, 2019.





Fig. 17. *Undergrowth*, installation detail, 2019.



Fig. 18. *Undergrowth*, installation detail, 2019.





Fig. 19. *Gardens & Grottoes*, exhibition detail, 2019.



Fig. 20. *Surface Bodies*, installation detail, 2019.





Fig. 21. *Surface Bodies*, installation detail, 2019.



Fig. 22. *Surface Bodies*, installation detail, 2019.





Fig. 23. *Chrysalis II*, installation detail, 2019.



Fig. 24. *Karst Composting*, installation detail, 2019.