

Rohini Devasher

...for that which we imagine must be either something already seen or a composite of things and parts of things seen at different times; such are sphinxes, sirens, chimeras, centaurs etc.

—Galileo Galilei, Sagredo quoted from the *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems (Dialogosoprai due massimisistemi del mondo)*, 1632.

British artist Paul Morrison has described his interest in “cognitive landscape. the terrain that one sees, somewhere behind the eyes”. This idea of a landscape that looks back, of a nature that is non-passive, in turn idyllic, uncanny, threatening and seductive, is something I have been working with for some time now.

My training as a printmaker provided the foundation for my interest in self-organization of pattern in nature. This led to experiments with video-feedback and the idea of the gradual articulation of a surface became the means to construct something entirely new.

Similar to kaleidoscopes, video-feedback is created when an ordinary hand-held camera is plugged into a TV and pointed at itself. The optical equivalent of acoustic feedback, a loop is created between the video camera and the television screen or monitor. Through a process of trial and error, it becomes possible to explore a vast arena of spontaneous pattern generation by varying the available controls (brightness, contrast, hue, focus, camera angle etc.). The result is an amazing array of spatio-temporal patterns, mimicking those exhibited by physical, chemical and biological systems, i.e. plant structures, tree forms, bacteria, snowflakes.

1.

Seed, by Rohini Devasher, 2004. Charcoal, acrylic, colour pencil, oil pastel, wood; 245 x 457 cm. “Seed” is the first of several wall drawings that explore landscape as a living entity. Through the process of the drawing, done on site over three months, the relationship between the drawing and the forms from which it is derived is gradually blurred. The curve of the wall further heightens the sense of being engulfed, of being destabilized.

2.

Arboreal, by Rohini Devasher, 2011, single-channel video, duration 16 minutes. “Arboreal” began with an exploration of L-systems, a formal grammar most famously used to model the growth processes of plant development, introduced in 1968 by the Hungarian theoretical biologist and botanist Aristid Lindenmayer. “Arboreal” or “relating to or resembling a tree” is not modelled on any algorithms or programs. This slowly growing tree was constructed through the gradual manual layering of more than 700 individual layers of video.

What happens in the case of mutation? Consider the example of the genetic code. Mutation normally occurs when some random event (for example, a burst of radiation or a coding error) disrupts an existing pattern and something else is put in its place instead. Mutation is crucial because it names the bifurcation point at which the interplay between pattern and randomness causes the system to evolve in a new direction.

—N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Where Freud held that the uncanny is very often neither supernatural nor particularly mysterious in its origin, but rather, completely familiar, conversely I am interested in working with material that is quite extraordinary in its origins, and its subsequent making into the familiar, the almost mundane. Yet, because of the nature of its origins, it retains a quality of the uncanny. A tree is many things; it could be bone, or cartilage, but, bone or cartilage that is digitally generated via the process of video-feedback. The flower appears to be not quite plant, not animal, nor human, not exactly machine, but something else entirely; something of all those, but none of them alone. The result is a feeling of it being uncomfortably strange or uncomfortably familiar.

These creatures exist because of processes of both embodied and disembodied digital mirroring. They are both material and method, object and subject, of the machine and the viewer.

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