

Nature Calls

Bread & Circus Gallery

REPLYING TO NATURE'S CALL

By Jeff Schofield and Madelaine Corbin

Note: The co-authors of this essay are artists exhibiting in the show. Descriptions of their work are included in the form of footnotes.

Nature's Call is not silent. There are sounds that reverberate from lichen to leaf, river to sky, and sunlight to stone. The hum that resonates all around—the one that we humans are a part of, too—is not as soft as it may at first seem. Our more-than-human world is continuously conversing, interactions endlessly echoing. As is true of echoes, nature's voice also comes back to the listener. We hear and feel these vibrations of language as nature's call.

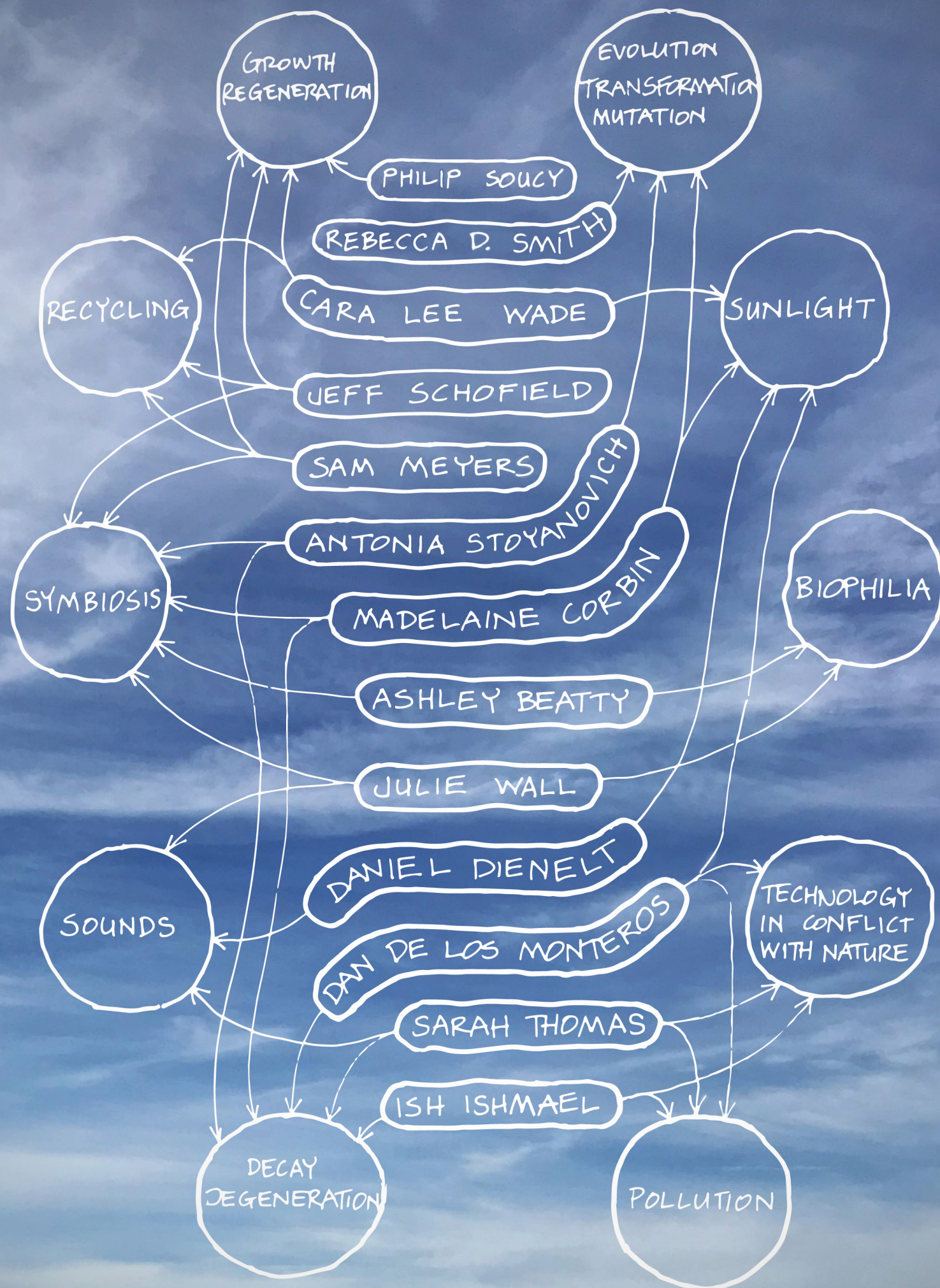
Often nature's call is not met with a timely human response. With urgency, sincerity, and even humor, the artists in this exhibition offer a current response to nature's call. Here, visual artworks collectively celebrate and commemorate nature as seen today. Moments of optimism and growth contrast with episodes of decay, death, and environmental retaliations. At first, human interventions in nature appear as scars, intrusions, and traumas laid upon our earthly body by human bodies. As the exhibition continues, however, the curatorial project reveals how humans are also affected in return. Nature changes us, too.

It has been proposed that our current geological era be called the Anthropocene, defined as the epoch in which human activity becomes the decisive element affecting changes to our climate, environment, geology, and ecosystems. Like the Anthropocene, "Nature Calls" is a conversation between humans and our planet. This rich symphony evokes, rather than describes, the intricacies of our evolving world. It flows: Nature calls, We respond, We call, Nature responds. With great repetition comes a blending of speakers. Eventually the separate entities calling and responding blur together and resonate as one.

For instance, notions of aligned sound are evoked in Julie Wall's figurative drawings of human and animal forms titled "Listening," "Thrum," and "Echo." Beyond conjuring sounds, the sensitive renderings show humanity identifying with other living things. The series emanates respect for nature, right down to the circular frames recalling globes, crescent moons, or other planetary bodies. Images of sounds emerge from Daniel Dienelt's dreamy digital photographs of plant forms, which seek to visualise what we might hear emitting from leaves and branches. Sunlight unifies these colourful abstract images.

Sunlight's natural processes are celebrated in several sensitive artworks that embody the properties of daylight as artistic media.¹ Figurative flower images by Cara Lee Wade use sunlight-sensitive paper to transform floral specimens into colorful graphic photos called "Lumen." Created while the artist lived in Pandemic-isolation, the works are a contemplative study of house plants representing landscapes no longer accessible to home-bound city dwellers. Sam Meyers explores degrees of light, transparency, and opacity in her hanging composition of found objects and natural elements. The translucent panels suggest skin, threads, and trimmings that evoke generations of life lived close to nature.

¹ An abstract sculpture by Madelaine Corbin weaves together fibers imbued with natural, plant-based colors that will fade through exposure to daylight, titled "Sun Breathing." The apparent harmony is illusory, however, since the piece gradually discolors in an embedded process of decay wherever the sun touches, which will permanently alter the composition over time.



At the other extreme, expressing conflict with nature are videos denouncing the adverse effects of capitalist exploitation on our more-than-human ecosystems. Sarah Thomas' video on water pollution, "Algae Brah," criticizes large-scale contamination of natural sites with flashing images of an uninhabitable future. Ish Ishmael's video, "Steel Gulls," depicts animals in conflict with human industry as steel mills belch smoke into the clouds and displace flocks of birds. We hear only the factory noise, not bird calls, as if in premonition of fowl extinctions. In a similarly mortal vein, Dan De Los Monteros presents a multi-layered photograph of landscapes devastated by forest fires. The vividly flaming image screams a doomsday drama about an overheated planet resulting from the human-caused Colorado fires of 2020—fires that changed the daylight afforded by the sun's rays.

Ashley Beatty's photographs of a nude human climbing tree trunks listens in on a quiet, intimate relationship between human beings and other life forms as both fuse together in a demonstration of biophilia. Instead of personifying the tree, the human is made arboreal. A second series of photographs showing a tombstone in the forest reminds humans that nature envelops and outlives our physical bodies. The enlarged black and white contact sheets suggest a passage of human time and mortality. Black and white photographs of landscapes and animals by Antonia Stoyanovich express an equally quiet world of trees growing old and birds at rest. Human-made elements nearby or in the distance serve to place the living beings in a cultural and temporal context dominated by humans and weathered by nature.

This weathering is similarly present in Philip Soucy's anthropomorphic, coiled ceramics inspired by mountain landscapes and pine trees. Organic in form, these pieces occupy a place between figuration and abstraction, utility and design, craft and art.² Further blending multiple crafts and media, Rebecca Daryl Smith's delicately detailed works on paper carry marks and words composed like codes serving as warnings and elegies for earth. Smith's woven wicker bundle is an empty reminder of the things we carried, be they manufactured items or worldly burdens we bear throughout our lives.

This sublime artistic offering is charged by the immense depth and breadth of relationships between the artworks shared here. Individual moments coalesce into an overwhelming series of connections between the artists and nature that overlap in intricate and often unexpected ways. Here, at the interstice of nature's call and the artists' response, is the exhibition. The show may be temporary. But when all the art is packed away, for another show on another day, nature will still be calling.

² In a more geometric vein, large scale artworks of found objects by Jeff Schofield probe the intersections between sculpture, architecture, and installation art. Pendulums made from Mulberry branches hang dramatically to commemorate a storm-damaged tree, while weeds and wildflowers are preserved in glass jars like individual specimens in a museum collection.