

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS ST. PETE

THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG DEBUTS GROUNDBREAKING CAMPUS-WIDE EXHIBITION: “THE NATURE OF ART”

“The Nature of Art” looks at the disparate ways humans have engaged in artistic expression to understand our environment, mediate our relationship with nature, and attain a more profound comprehension of our role within the world.

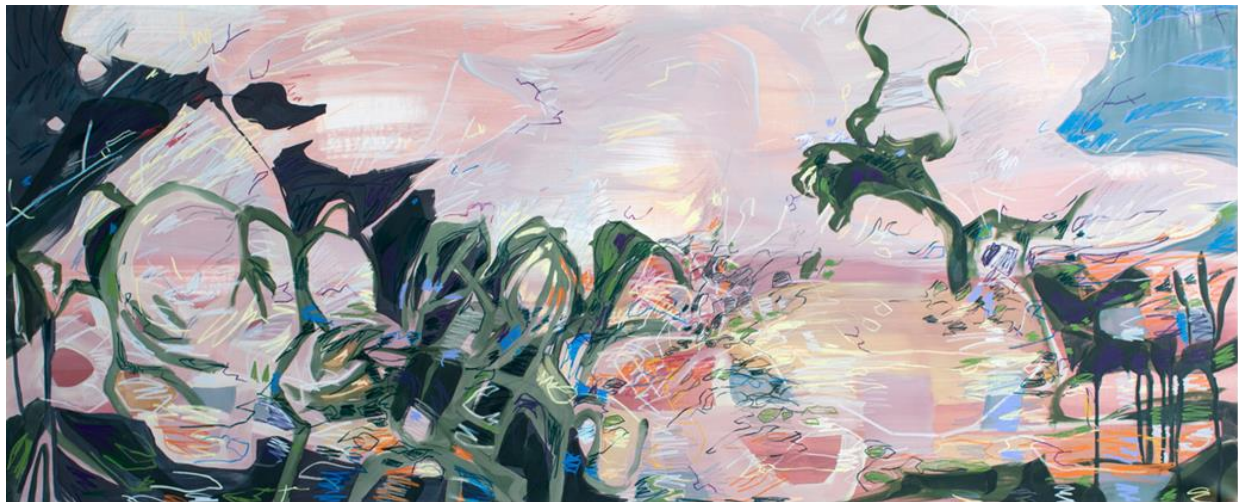


ST. PETERSBURG, FL (November 3, 2023) — [The Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg](#) (MFA), has unveiled its inaugural campus-wide exhibition, [The Nature of Art](#), a celebration of humanity’s highest aspirations—the intellectual and creative pursuits that reflect and shape our world. This exhibition brings together, for the first time, the special exhibition galleries in the Hough Wing with the MFA Collection galleries in the Volk Wing. The connected ideas generated from *The Nature of Art* traverse throughout the MFA campus, sparking conversations with works in the collection and allowing visitors to experience them through a new lens.

As an encyclopedic museum, the MFA aims to examine the whole of human art production, and one of the most exciting possibilities of a collection that spans 5,000 years is the ability to explore big ideas

across space, time, and geography. This provides an opportunity to observe the commonalities of the human journey and contemplate how specific conditions produce unique works of art with a strong sense of place. *The Nature of Art* looks at the disparate ways humans have engaged in artistic expression to understand our environment, mediate our relationship with nature, and attain a more profound comprehension of our role within the world.

"*The Nature of Art* is a year-long, collaborative initiative of study, exhibitions, and programming that celebrates our ongoing examination of the MFA's encyclopedic collection," remarked **Chief Curator Dr. Stanton Thomas**. "This unprecedented, institution-wide project brought together a broad range of expertise and viewpoints, refocusing our encyclopedic collection through the lens of the natural world and our relationship to it. *The Nature of Art* is especially pertinent, given our fraught relationship with the planet."



The exhibition features themed sections, each anchored with select artworks from the MFA Collection and complemented by contemporary works from some of today's most influential artists, all viewed through the distinctive lens of *The Nature of Art*. Contemporary artists participate in various sections of the exhibition, fostering dynamic conversations with artists of the past in the MFA Collection. This interaction brings to life 5,000 years of human artistic expression through the lens of modern practitioners. Contemporary artists featured in the exhibition include **James Casebere** (American, b. 1953), **Howard Finster** (American, 1916—2001), **Brookhart Jonquil** (American, b. 1984), **Daniel Lind-Ramos** (Puerto-Rican, b. 1953), **Sarah Meyohas** (French-American, b. 1991), **Postcommodity** (**Cristóbal Martinez, Mestizo, and Kade L. Twist, Cherokee**), **Duke Riley** (American, b. 1972), **Alexis Rockman** (American, b. 1962), **Christian Sampson** (American, b. 1974), and **Janaina Tschäpe** (Brazilian-German, b. 1973). A diverse range of interpretive programming began with *Art on Film: Thumbs Up for Mother Universe, an Evening with Lonnie Holley* in September. These events will accompany the exhibition, offering a platform for contemporary voices in the discourse of art and nature. These programs present a spectrum of perspectives, from 19th-century U.S. Manifest Destiny ethos to powerful indigenous voices (featuring Postcommodity, Ursula Hudson, Lisa Reihana, and more).

THE ARTIST AS SENTINEL

The artist's role continues to evolve across space and time, as seen in the expansive encyclopedic collection of the MFA, which reveals the artist as a craftsperson, an intellectual, an interpreter, and an

observer, among other roles. Through *The Artist as Sentinel*, we see the role of the artist as a herald of climate realities and as a steward of the environment, watching over and caring for the land, air, and water. At this moment in time, with environmental challenges threatening life and livelihood worldwide, this role of steward is more crucial than ever. *The Artist as Sentinel* serves as a platform for contemporary artists who illuminate our troubled environment, offering not only inspiration and solace but also cautionary tales. Hauntingly beautiful photographs by **James Casebere** show human ambitions and modern architecture, and the rising seas that well-capture our conflicting desires.



Janaina Tschäpe's abstract works carry forward a tradition spanning centuries, where artists explore nature through landscape painting. However, her approach is uniquely abstract, emphasizing the profound experience of the sublime. **Daniel Lind-Ramos'** monumental sculpture, *Centinelas de la luna nueva* (*Sentinels of the New Moon*), inspired the title of this section, *The Artist as Sentinel*, and shows the common stewardship role of both the artist and the environmentalist. **Postcommodity's** *kinaypikowiyâs* comprises debris booms that catch and hold environmental contaminants such as garbage, oil, and chemicals. The colors of the booms correspond to different types of threats—red (flammable), yellow (radioactive), blue (dangerous), and white (poisonous)—in the labeling system for hazardous materials. To indigenous peoples, these are shared medicine colors that carry knowledge, purpose, and meaning throughout the Western Hemisphere (nēhiyawēwin title provided by Gerald McMaster).

THE ARTIST AS CURATOR

Art museums have long held importance in the lives of contemporary artists, from Picasso and Braque's inspiring visit to the Cézanne retrospective that gave rise to Cubism, to the long-held practice of artists sketching in the galleries, "learning from the masters." This symbiotic and inspiring relationship between artist and institution is at its peak when curators cede some territory to artists and allow them to choose works in the collection that hold a special place in their practice. This is the most direct form of dialogue between artists of different periods and is especially illuminating for the visitor. **Christian Sampson**, influenced by the California Light and Space Movement, has created an installation with the *Houses of Parliament: Effect of Fog, London* by **Claude Monet**. He is interested in current scholarship that suggests the hazy fog so often associated with the work of Monet is an early depiction of air pollution, offering an entirely new perspective on artists' representations of light.



Sarah Meyohas has engaged with **Georgia O'Keeffe's *Poppy***, as both artists share an interest in intensely close empirical observation of nature, as well as a bond as women artists in a patriarchal world where women artists are often viewed through the lens of their gender.



I LOVE YOU TO DEATH

Throughout history, human consumption of natural resources has often far exceeded available supplies. This exhibition features objects made from a number of materials derived from plants and animals that are today threatened with extinction: elephant ivory, coral, ebony, and tortoise shell. For centuries, these precious materials—valued for their beauty or their perceived healing or spiritual qualities—have been exploited to create remarkable works of art. *I Love You to Death* gives us a chance to contemplate these objects not only aesthetically but also how they reflect humankind's obsession with luxury goods at the expense of the environment.

THE POLY S. TYRENE MEMORIAL MARITIME MUSEUM

Duke Riley's painted plastic trash emulating scrimshaw critically examines the pollution of waterways, its effect on sea life, and destruction of the ocean due to consumption and capitalism. Inspired by the

maritime museum displays he saw while a child in New England, Riley created these sculptures for the fictional **Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum**. They are contemporary versions of sailors' scrimshaw, though made of painted trash rather than delicately etched whale teeth and bones, accented with dark pigments. Actual scrimshaw objects helped sailors fill the boredom of months at sea while hunting whales, which were slaughtered for their oil. However, kerosene became the primary source of lamp oil in the 1860s, and the whaling industry—which caused the extinction of entire whale species—became nearly obsolete.

Riley first thought about using plastic as ersatz scrimshaw when he saw what he thought was a whalebone on a Rhode Island beach; it turned out to be the handle of a deck brush. Riley regularly removes trash from shorelines and waterways, often using this refuse in his work. His imagery is both decorative and humorous, and sometimes pointed. His faux scrimshaw includes imaginative portraits of the CEOs of Nestlé, DuPont, and Exxon—all significant contributors to ocean pollution.

SINE ACQUA, NIHIL / WITHOUT WATER, NOTHING



From the primordial mineral-rich seas from which life emerged to the massive air-conditioning systems that allow the world's digital data to be cooled and thus preserved, we are from and dependent upon

water. Throughout history, artists have made works associated with this essential substance, including depictions of gods and spirits, vessels to contain the substance, and countless images of the ocean, rainstorms, lakes, seas, ponds, rivers, pools, and springs. This exhibition examines the vital human relationship with water and how artists from diverse cultures have explored this crucial life-giving, and yet threatening, resource. *Sine Acqua, Nihil / Without Water, Nothing* features works that reflect the wide-ranging role of water as a source of respite, a mysterious quasi-spiritual entity, a dangerous force, a homely necessity, a mode of transportation, or a finite, surprisingly delicate resource.

BLOOD, SEA



Reminiscent of Voltaire's *Micromégas*, artist **Janaina Tschäpe's** fantastical scenes dissolve boundaries, seamlessly intertwining in an ever-flowing continuum of evolution and transformation in a grand opera that delves into themes of change, gender, and the construction of myth and history. The universe created by artist Tschäpe beckons one into a parallel world of ambiguous scale—indeterminate in both time and space. A spring-fed grotto provides the scenographic impetus for this grand production, a captivating fusion of a theme park nestled within a state park and bearing the distinction as one of Florida's oldest roadside attractions. The sea maiden mythologies that inform *Blood, Sea* link endless stories from across time and space, as many cultures have some version of a water goddess.

GROUNDLESS

A spotlight focus on artist **Brookhart Jonquil** constitutes an installation that weaves throughout the Sculpture Garden and the Junior League Great Hall, intersecting and engaging with both nature and the historic architecture and interiors of the MFA's original Volk Wing. Jonquil's work engages physics, architecture, and ecology to explore the immaterial, shifting aspects of the natural world. His sculptural installation in the Garden, titled ***Multiplication Portal***, offers a participatory experience. Visitors can collect clippings to propagate within the sculpture, which can later be planted to nurture ideas beyond the confines of the Museum space. ***E(A)R(T)H***, the sculpture in the Great Hall, links visually and conceptually to *The Overview Effect* gallery, perfectly demonstrating how the entire MFA campus is enlivened with multiple threads of The Story of Art through *The Nature of Art*.

THE OVERVIEW EFFECT

During the 1960s, just a few years before the founding of the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, astronauts propelled beyond the confines of Earth into space. There—as the first humans to see our planet from a distance—many of them were utterly overwhelmed: spiritually, emotionally, existentially. Describing their reaction to the sight of the Earth existing within the broader cosmos, many noted feelings of profound awe, heightened self-awareness, and deep appreciation of beauty—as well as an increased sense of connection to other humans and the planet itself. Together, their reactive experiences to something of extraordinary beauty and power are known as ***The Overview Effect***. The expression suggests the importance of seeing something from above and at a great distance, offering the chance to form new perspectives and perceptions. Although the phrase was coined to describe reactions to seeing the Earth from space, it is akin to similar experiences throughout human history, triggering profound insight, stirring deep emotions, and engendering a sense of interconnectedness between the individual and nature. As part of *The Nature of Art* exhibition, *The Overview Effect* follows these interwoven lines, concentrating upon selected works within the MFA Collection and focusing on them as individual art pieces and as objects that reflect larger questions about our relationship with nature.

***The Nature of Art* is on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg through April 14, 2024.**

The Nature of Art is sponsored in part by The State of Florida through the Division of Arts and Culture and The National Endowment for the Arts.

Images:

Henry Koehler, American, active late 19th century, *Lake George, Florida*, 1881, Oil on canvas, Gift of Spanierman Gallery, Collection of Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida

Janaina Tschäpe, Brazilian-German, b. 1973, *MTA Small Study*, 2021, Casein and watercolor crayon on canvas, Courtesy of the artist

James Casebere, American, b. 1953, *Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #10*, 2011, Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery

Claude Monet, *Houses of Parliament: Effect of Fog, London*, 1904, Oil on canvas, Partial gift of Charles and Margaret Stevenson Henderson and Museum Purchase, Collection of Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida

Georgia O'Keeffe, American, 1887-1986, *Poppy*, 1927, Oil on canvas, Gift of Charles C. and Margaret Stevenson Henderson in memory of Jeanne Crawford Henderson, Collection of Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida

Alexis Rockman, b. 1962, *The Calms of Capricorn*, 2022, Oil and cold wax on wood, On loan from a private collection, Image courtesy of the artist

Janaina Tschäpe, Brazilian-German, b. 1973, *Blood, Sea* [video still], 2004, Courtesy of the artist

[Full Press Kit Available Here](#)

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ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG

The Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg (MFA) has an encyclopedic collection of art from around the globe and across the centuries, with almost 5,000 years of civilization represented in thousands of objects extending from antiquity to the present. The collection includes works by Georgia O'Keeffe, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Auguste Rodin, Kehinde Wiley, Jacob Lawrence, and many others, as well as ancient Greek and Roman, Asian, African, Art of the Americas and Native American art. The Museum's photographic collection is one of the largest and most well-respected in the Southeast. The museum's rotating exhibition galleries feature a diverse selection of temporary exhibitions from all over the world, as well as exhibitions curated from the museum's extensive collection. In addition to its robust exhibition program, the MFA engages the community through exciting public programs and events and serves students through youth programs and a partnership with the Pinellas County School System.

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