

ART

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# DIGITAL ART FLOATS INTO NEW REALM



IMAGES COURTESY OF MARINA ZURKOW

In Marina Zurkow's video animation, "Weights and Measures," top, the peaceful water gives way to airplanes sinking, elephants swimming and plankton floating. In "Slurb," above, the characters, who have been forced into the Old Tampa Bay water, make independent movements as the canvas scrolls from right to left on a loop. Both works will be part of Zurkow's show of digital animations titled "Friends, Enemies, and Others," on display at the Montclair Art Museum through January.

## Brooklyn artist turns animal animations into unpredictable visual form

**M**arina Zurkow's show of digital animations at the Montclair Art Museum, called "Friends, Enemies, and Others," is unlike any exhibit the museum has ever done. One difference is the large

monitors outside the main museum entrance, which show two of the artist's animations in a continuous loop throughout regular museum hours.

But the more fundamental difference lies in the nature of

Zurkow's animations themselves. The two showing outside are basically movies from her "Crossing the Waters" series (2006-09), assembled by the Brooklyn-based artist from images culled on the internet and transformed into

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marker-line drawings or used to create repeated background patterns. There are more of these inside, along with fake heraldry devoted to different invasive species in northeastern England, where Zurkow did a visiting artist gig in 2009.

But the black-and-white animation “Mesocosm (Northumberland, UK)” is different. It’s a multichannel, 146-hour video that details the changes in a landscape in northeastern England over the course of a typical year, a sort of moving Four Seasons (one minute of screen time equals one hour of real time).

But “Mesocosm” doesn’t merely traipse from autumn leaves to snow-covered fields and so on: It’s programmed to randomly introduce different elements at different times, so even the artist cannot predict what the artwork will display at any one moment.

And at some date in the near future, SkyNet will become self-aware.

“Friends, Enemies, and Others” inaugurates New Directions, a series of solo exhibitions devoted to contemporary artists under the direction of the museum’s first curator for Contemporary Art, Alexandra Schwartz. As a kind of internet-based art, Zurkow’s work is certainly art 2.0, but, as Schwartz says, it’s also “deeply

rooted in art history, and looks both back at tradition and forward to a new art.”

That’s because the center of Zurkow’s hand-traced landscape is occupied by an oak stump, and early in the video a hugely fat, shaved-headed man comes from stage left (the video is shaped like a triptych, with two dark and empty wings, in which figures can appear) and takes a seat upon the stump. There he assumes the unmistakable profile of one of the late Lucien Freud’s backviews of queer clothing designer and performance artist Leigh Bowery. Everything in the video happens around and on Bowery’s hulking frame, which in its way drags the video into the history of English painting and reminds us of the fine art every museum boasts.

As Bowery sits and contemplates the composite landscape before him, animals — sparrows, owls, cattle and many others, all now part of the Northumberland fauna (several are invasive species from America, like gray

squirrels) — move through the landscape, determined more or less by probabilities of the season.

Some come and crawl atop the figure’s massive, sloping shoulders. Some burrow into his copious flesh. They are joined, occasionally, by other invasive species, like immigrants from Eastern Europe or the Middle East — which have no season.

Zurkow has created triggers in her computer code based on research about species movements that cue these different actions on screen, but it’s randomly generated, so it’s as much a surprise to her as it is to us whenever she looks at the monitor.

This is still the early stages of such self-regulating animations, but you can see immediate similarities to 3-D scientific modelling and fractal computer graphing of ecosystems undergoing change. Zurkow’s underlying interest lies in the complex interrelationships among species in the modern world — her fake heraldry is meant to give the family tree of

species that have gone almost global, and to convey their impact on local systems of relationships.

The whole world is undergoing an eruption of regional resurgence right now; in fact, wherever the costs and risks of globalization have been shunted off onto national balance sheets (which is actually happening just about everywhere) local people are discovering their community and rebelling against the global collective. Even places we weren’t even sure still had a local sensibility, like Norway, are feeling this pull.

And while Zurkow’s work is still just beginning to exploit these programs, it’s far enough along to convey a liberating sense of where such animations might go in the future, bringing a purposeful sense of time passing into artwork. Up to now, the typical relationship between visual art and time has been that art stands outside time — *ars longa, vita brevis*. That statue looks the same today as it did yesterday, etc.

Zurkow hints at an art that could produce, finally, a portrait of Dorian Grey.

And it’s about time.

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Zurkow spent time in northeast England and after returning created 12 crests in 2011 that depicted invasive species. This one is titled “Bullfrog,” from the series “Heraldic Crests for Invasive Species.”

### Marina Zurkow: Friends, Enemies, and Others

**Where:** Montclair Art Museum, 3 South Mountain Ave., Montclair  
**When:** Through Jan. 8. Open Wednesdays to Sundays, noon to 5 p.m.

**How much:** Adults, \$12; seniors and students with I.D., \$10; children younger than 12, free. Call (973) 746-5555 or visit [montclair-art.com](http://montclair-art.com).



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