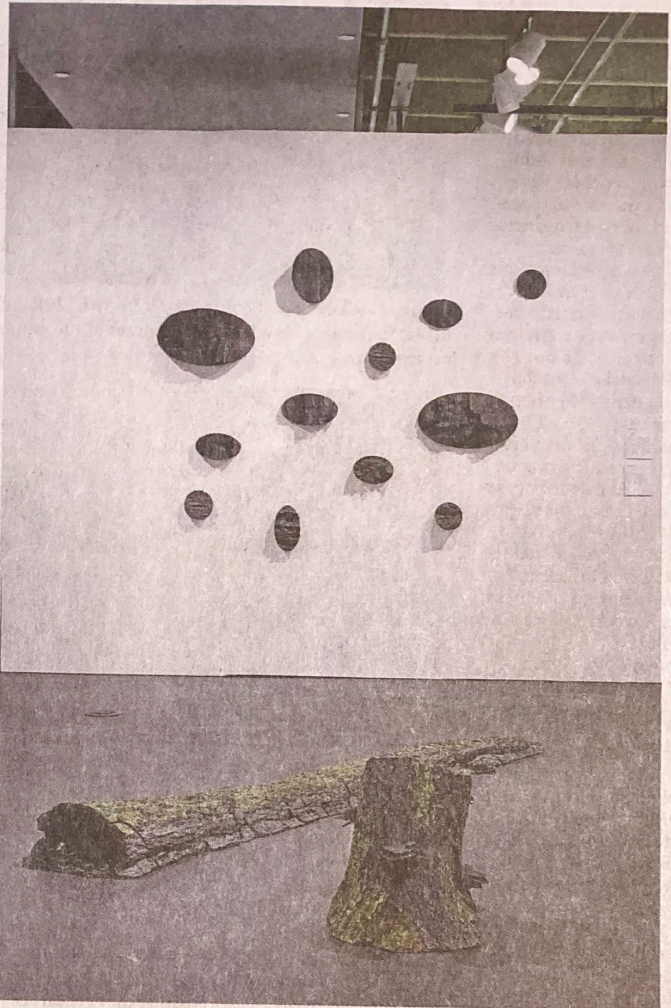


Killing nature

DU's "The Unbearable Impermanence of Things" refocuses 19th century naturalism through a contemporary, and artistic, filter



Mia Mulvey uses 3D printers to recreate, in charcoal and salt, sections of 3,000-year-old sequoias. *Wes Magyar, provided by Vicki Myhren Gallery*



Lex Thompson's 2016 photo "Portrait of Mabel Maxwell" recreates an image that naturalist Martha Maxwell made of her daughter more than a century ago. *Provided by Vicki Myhren Gallery*

By Ray Mark Rinaldi
Special to *The Denver Post*

Humans have never quite pinned down how they ought to interact responsibly with the natural world around them. Should they plant trees for oxygen or chop them down for firewood? Should they take animals into their homes as pets or eat them for dinner?

Co-exist with it all or conquer it? The naturalists of the 19th century turned these ethical questions into science, or at least a very crude version of science, venturing into untamed lands and mapping, exploring, capturing and cataloging the vegetation, rocks and wildlife they encountered. Part researchers, part hobbyists, they put their then-exotic finds on display in books, lectures and popular exhibitions, sparking a pub-

lic fascination with the non-human environment that endures today.

Those dated dioramas of stuffed buffalo and bighorn sheep that people love to photograph at the Denver Museum of *Nature and Science* — they have their roots in the early naturalist movement.

The exhibit titled "The Unbearable Impermanence of Things" at the University of Denver's Vicki Myhren Gallery looks at naturalism today, and through the lens of art, and finds that the enchantment with birds, fish, flora and geological specimens is still going strong among sculptors, photographers and installationists of all varieties.

Though, as curator Libby Barbee demonstrates, there's definite 21st-century sensibility to the present-day work, which is informed by updated science and technology, an awareness of planetary vulnerabilities and

NATURE » 3E

If you go

"The Unbearable Impermanence of Things" continues through Dec. 1 at the Vicki Myhren Gallery, located at 2121 E. Asbury Ave., inside the Shwayder Art Building at the University of Denver. It's free. Info at 303-871-3716 or online at vicki-myhren-gallery.du.edu

NATURE

◀ FROM 1E

climate change, and some post-modern myth-busting.

And, certainly, a bit of nostalgia, which is evident the moment visitors enter the gallery door and encounter Lex Thompson's "Re/collect," a site-specific menagerie of actual, stuffed wildlife that pays tribute to Colorado's own Martha Maxwell (1831-1881), who dedicated her life to documenting various species dwelling in the local terrain. A pioneering taxidermist, she ventured into field and mountain, capturing, killing and mounting various things and exhibiting her finds around the country.

With help from DMNS, which loaned items from its storage for the exhibit, Thompson brings a number of animals together into one tableaux — a pelican, wolf, hawk, beaver, badger, hen and other once-living things — creating a sort of peaceable kingdom where all animals get along quite well. The scene has natural roots, but it's entirely artificial.

Unlike DMNS, which uses backdrops of mountainscapes and grasslands in its dioramas, Thompson places his specimens in front a green screen, a tool that digital animators use in their craft and a nod to the manipulative way artists separate out and present things in the current age.

And because this is 2019, he gives over to the realities of personal technology and adds a deliberate selfie opportunity, drawing a bright, yellow circle on the floor in front of the setup and labeling it "Photo Spot." There's some humor to that, but also an acknowledgment that one of art's highest and best uses today is to serve as a backdrop to the autobiographies that so many people write on a daily basis via social media.

That same self-conscious mix of playfulness and irony informs the photographs of Richard Barnes, whose contributions to this exhibit capture images of maintenance and construction crews working directly inside wildlife dioramas. One photo, "Man with Buffalo," from 2015, shows a worker vacuuming the floor of a diorama while an oversized taxidermed mammal grazes on the fake grass under its nose. Another, 2008's "Single Undulate Amongst Blue Crosses," documents a worker napping during the installation of another diorama depicting some horned creature in a desert plain.

Barnes' photos break down the fourth wall of these tourist at-



An installation shot from "The Unbearable Impermanence of Things." Wes Magyar, provided by Vicki Myhren Gallery



Lex Thompson's "Re/collect," is a site-specific insulation that uses loaned specimens from eh Denver Museum of Nature and Science. Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post

tractions, and to great effect. Dioramas are relics of a different age, one that serious museums have mostly left behind in favor of exhibiting real science over stuffed animals. Still, they cling to these oddities; maybe because they remind us of a time when learning about the world was

less complicated.

There are more serious moments in "The Unbearable Impermanence of Things." Barbee includes a piece by Denver artist Megan Gafford, which uses uranium (real, active uranium) as its core medium — and which, according to gallery signage, actually exposes viewers to small doses of gamma radiation. Sounds scary, though it's a very small dose, no stronger than what humans encounter every day.

But it serves as an exploration of our misunderstanding of natural elements, and underscores the debates that scientists have over the benefits and danger of radiation in our lives. Gafford includes on the wall above her piece a close-up video of the alcohol cloud that emanates naturally from nuclear radiation. It's quite lovely, actually, just a bit of mist floating off a rock, so peaceful and lulling, how could that be so dangerous?

"The Unbearable Impermanence of Things" is entirely open-minded on the concept of beauty, and that's what keeps it interesting. Artist John McEnroe casts ordinary tree stumps and fallen branches into impeccably-rendered plastic sculptures. Mia Mulvey uses 3D printers to recreate, in charcoal and salt, sections of 3,000-year-old sequoias. Eileen Roscina Richardson applies the ancient art of natural tree shaping to fungi, using light exposure to make her plants grow in zig-zag patterns, and then places them under bell jars for public inspection.

All of this work is amazing to behold, and it strives to help us understand our interactions with the natural world, particularly in the West, but none of it fits neatly into traditional definitions of beauty.

What all of the work does have in common is a stillness, a sort of freezing of crucial moments. In some way, all of these artists



Eileen Roscina Richardson applies the ancient art of natural tree shaping to fungi, using light exposure to make her plants grow in zig-zag patterns.

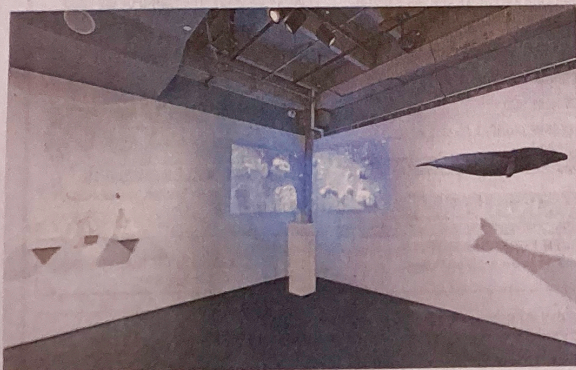
Wes Magyar, provided by Vicki Myhren Gallery

have pushed the pause button on a world that's constantly in motion. "The Unbearable Impermanence of Things" explains scientific observation — and art itself — in terms of time. We can't look at something without stopping its motion, so our eyes can focus and our brains can process.

Or maybe we can. Maybe it's possible — even better — to understand things in their organic, dynamic state. There's some ridiculousness to the idea that we would study the way things grow and evolve by interrupting the process, by confining or killing them, especially with the technology that's available today.

But that's not how humans operate. For us, co-existing requires conquering and capturing. That was true for Martha Maxwell a century and a half ago and it remains true for Mia Mulvey, Megan Gafford and Lex Thompson today.

Ray Mark Rinaldi (media@rayrinaldi.com) is a veteran arts writer and critic based in Denver.



In the center, Megan Gafford's "Hormesis," which uses uranium as its core element. Wes Magyar, provided by Vicki Myhren Gallery