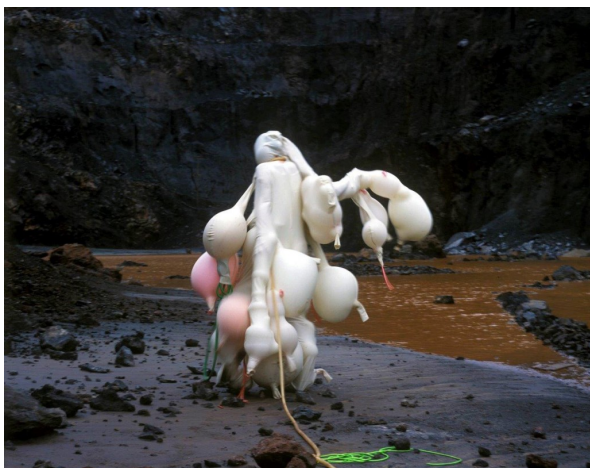


# SEANKELLY

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## HYPERALLERGIC

### How Women Artists Have Explored Nature's Unruly Side



Janaina Tschäpe, "Livia 2" (2003), color print, 40 x 50 in. (on loan from the Tony Podesta Collection)

WASHINGTON, DC — Dual exhibitions at the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) in Washington, DC, challenge the artistic interpretation of nature by women as something always beautiful and fragile. These exhibitions suggest that for many artists nature is an unrefined realm for examining the cycle of life and death, destruction in an industrial world, and the natural world's feral spirit.

*Organic Matters—Women to Watch 2015* and *Super Natural* opened last month, the former featuring 13 emerging artists who work with nature as a theme in their art, and the latter concentrating on historic and modern creators. Although organized as separate exhibitions, they flow together in their joined galleries like one (no photography allowed, so you'll have to imagine). Each of the 13 artists in the *Women to Watch* biennial was selected through regional NMWA outreach committees by curators in the United States, Chile, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom.

The exhibitions are arranged aesthetically, but it's worth stepping back chronologically to the earliest pieces in the 25-artist *Super Natural*, when still lifes and botanicals were considered mild and appropriate themes for women. Yet there is subversion and decay embedded in this work. Seventeenth-century Dutch artist Rachel Ruysch was the daughter of anatomist Frederik Ruych, famed for his complex and macabre dioramas of human and other natural specimens. Her dark, detailed flower compositions like "Roses, Convolvulus, Poppies, and Other Flowers on a Stone Ledge" from the late 1680s capture realistic moments of life, where insects creep on flower petals and curled leaves, their edges a withering brown. Another artist, 17th-century German naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian, meticulously illustrated animal specimens, particularly insects, on independent journeys to South America. While male scientists overlooked her work at

the time, although partly because it was published in German and not Latin, it accurately and dynamically identified new species and their life processes.

Leaping forward a few centuries, paintings of flowers and landscapes endure as stereotypically feminine work. Ysabel LeMay, whose "Reflection" (2014) print is a whirl of birds and flowers collaged between two waterlines, states on the exhibition's interactive site:

Nature is omnipresent in my work. I strive not only to honor its beauty, grace, and power, but also to go further, to explore and learn from nature's consciousness, its infinite procession of interrelationships.

In *Organic Matters*, nature is overall a way of understanding life. Rachel Sussman journeyed around the world to photograph the planet's oldest living organisms; and Polly Morgan's "Systemic Inflammation" (2010) has a flock of dead finches flying above a steel cage. The taxidermy is a way of people trying to bring back an appearance of life, an attempt to understand something of the birds' wild nature.

Other artists examine this tension between the natural and artificial world, such as duo Sara Goldschmied and Eleonora Chiari's "Nymphaea #12" (2007), where waterlilies are formed from discarded plastic bags in the Tiber River. Even the easier metaphors on nature, like its decomposition and cycles reflecting on mortality, have surprising moments. In the *Super Natural* exhibition, Janaina Tschape traveled the world for her *100 Little Deaths* series, taking self-portrait photographs where she lay down in different landscapes, a sort of traveling corpse, but also suggesting how we give up something of ourselves to each place we experience.

Between the two exhibitions hosting some 38 artists, it's impossible to contain everyone beneath one neat idea. Yet as in past NMWA biennials that focused on textile art and figure painting, *Organic Matters* both deconstructs and celebrates preconceptions of femininity in nature-inspired art.