

We live like trees inside the footsteps of our ancestors

12 May - 22 July 2023

Marianne Hoffmeister Castro, Jeannette Muñoz, Renata Padovan, Maya Watanabe
Curated by Dr Marianna Tsionki and Dr Mariana Cunha

*Mioushii wayaa ma\’akaa saain wunuu, sulu\’upuna
Nouchikii na wapuulerua janakanat.*

*We live, like trees,
inside the footsteps of our ancestors.*

The first lines of Vito Apūshana’s poem, Kataa—Ououta (To Live—To Die), convey at once feelings of permanence and transience in relation to land and kinship. To Live—To Die is an ode to nature’s cycles, conjuring the image of the tree as an agent that represents deep ties to ancestry, mystic and ritualistic webs weaved in a biocultural environment.

Rooted in the indigenous philosophy of Wayuu people in the Venezuela-Colombia border, the poem voices their cosmivision, relationship with nature and understanding of the natural environment. Drawing on Apūshana’s words and imagination, the exhibition *We live like trees inside the footsteps of our ancestors* presents diverse responses to environmental spoliation on human and nonhuman life, inviting us to reappraise human-nature entanglements.



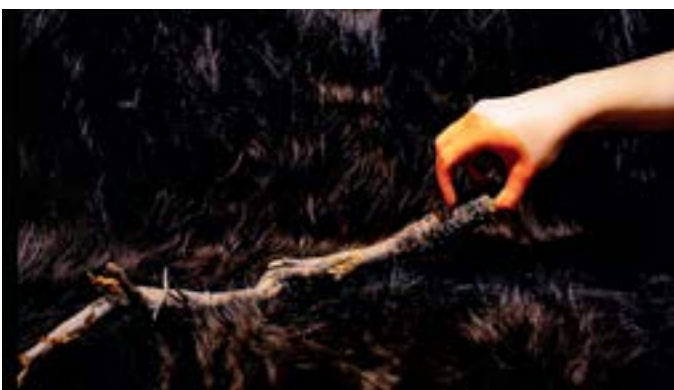
We live like trees inside the footsteps of our ancestors, Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Arts Gallery, May 12–July 22, 2023. Photo: Jules Lister

Encompassing mix-media, sculptural and audio-visual installations, the exhibition moves radically apart from colonial legacies and capitalism’s fixation with material surplus, which became the foundation for exploitative economies, extractive practices, and the schism between nature and culture. Engaging with the intensifying environmental crisis, the artists’ pieces presented in the exhibition disrupt long-established ideologies of landscape and territorial ownership, thus challenging conventional colonial, anthropocentric thinking. Instead, the exhibition invites us to immerse ourselves in the radical coexistence, networks of care and imaginative elaborations of the environment.

A Study of Beaverness or How (not) to be a World-Destroyer (2020-ongoing) by **Marianne Hoffmeister Castro** reconsiders the afterlives of colonialism in a narrative experiment that explores the presence of beavers in different territories and contexts. In 1946, the North American beaver was introduced into Tierra del Fuego to establish regional commercial fur trading. Following the failure of the fur industry, the non-native species were seen to be invasive; an eradication plan - one of the largest ever attempted - was agreed by the governments of Chile and Argentina. Hoffmeister Castro's work challenges the dominant perception of invasiveness through multidisciplinary methodologies proposing speculative fabulations and alternative environmental futures. The 2-channel video and research materials are part of an ongoing research-based project which presents non-human perspectives and new iconographies of multispecies cohabitation. Experimenting with language and representation, the work grants nonhuman animals a complex historical agency defying the colonial paradigm of invasiveness and destruction. Rather, we are called to participate in new futures of survival and coexistence.



Marianne Hoffmeister Castro, A Study of Beaverness or How (not) to be a World-Destroyer (2020-ongoing), installation view, Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Arts University, photo: Jules Lister Photography



Irreversible (2019) by **Renata Padovan** explores the aftermath of large infrastructure projects on the Amazon Forest. Focusing on images of snags, standing dead tree trunks emerging from the waters of a flooded forest, the photographic installation invites us unswervingly to face the impacts of extractive activities in the Amazon Forest. In 1981, during the military dictatorship in Brazil, the construction of the Balbina hydroelectric dam and power plant on the Uatumã River began. To this day, it is a controversial project considered to be one of the biggest ecological disasters in Brazil. It flooded 2,360 square kilometres of forest, whose vegetation went on to decompose in the reservoir, destroying biodiversity and violently displacing Waimiri-Atroari indigenous groups from the autochthonous territory. Printed in voile fabric, the black and white reproductions offer us a sensorial route through the effects of this disaster, thereby exposing the ecologically destructive impacts of 'irreversible' developments like Balbina.

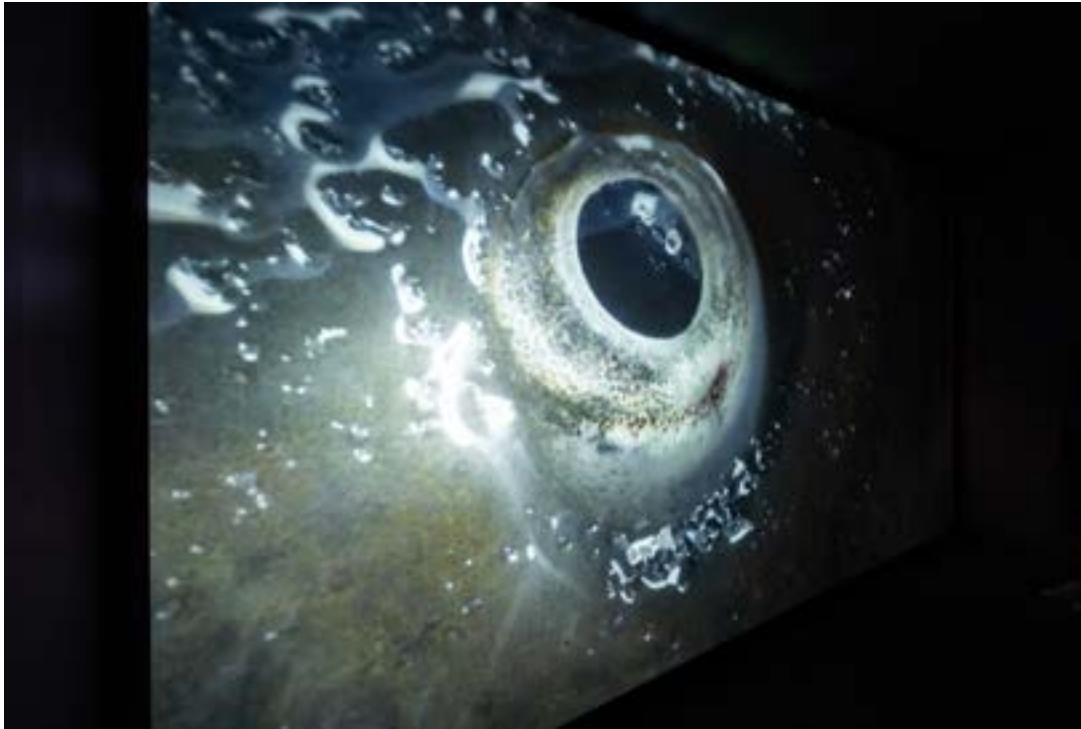


Renata Padovan, Irreversible, 2019, installation view, Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Arts University, photo: Jules Lister Photography

Derived from the Mapuche word Mapudungun, Puchuncaví is a town in the Valparaiso province in Chile, also known to be one of the terminals of the pre-Columbian Inca Road system. Uncontrolled industrialisation and extractive activities have turned Puchuncaví into a sacrifice zone, generating extensive social and political tensions. In the two-channel video installation Puchuncaví (2015-ongoing), **Jeannette Muñoz** creates an inventory of fragments, multiplicities, and environmental conditions, in a multi-layered visual representation of the area. The 16mm moving images acquire a tactile feel, where environmental inequality is depicted in fleeting scenes of contaminated waters, toxic air, local fishing activity and animal life, all providing a textural quality to this biocultural environment.



Strategies of survival are explored in **Maya Watanabe's** *Stasis* (2018). This immersive video installation looks closely at the steady reactivation of metabolic operations of crucian carps. Guided by a scientist and filmed at De Waag's 17th century anatomical theatre building, *Stasis* disrupts our conventional notions of scale and rhythm, and registers the almost imperceptible inactivity of the fish activating its self-regulating system to undergo cryogenic preservation. As such, the work explores the physiological knowledge of the carp to exist between living and non-living states, while the mesmerising images prompt us to challenge biopolitical conventions of life and death.



Maya Watanabe, *Stasis*, 2018, installation view, Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Arts University, photo: Jules Lister Photography

Public Programme

Archivo Webinar Series 2023: The Indigenous Gaze

May 17 2023

Curating 'We Live Like Trees Inside the Footsteps of Our Ancestors', a talk by the curators discussing the curatorial process of the research exhibition

CREAM 2023 Summer Social

11 July 2023

Conversation: *We Live Like Trees Inside the Footsteps of Our Ancestors*. A conversation between Dr Mariana Cunha and Dr Ozlem Koksal on the exhibition co-curated by Dr Cunha and Dr Tsionki

Publication

We Live Like Trees Inside the Footsteps of Our Ancestors

ed. Marianna Cunha & Marianna Tsionki

K.Verlag Berlin 2025





Exhibition Reviews

Carpenter, S. (2023) 'We Live, Like Trees, Inside the Footsteps of Our Ancestors', Corridor8, 7 July. Available at: <https://corridor8.co.uk/article/we-live-like-trees-inside-the-footsteps-of-our-ancestors/> (Accessed: 17 Sep 2024).

Saenger Silva, G. (2023) 'We Live Like Trees Inside the Footsteps of our Ancestors' ARCHIVO PAPERS: Journal of Photography and Visual Culture, 3(2), pp. 119–126. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10038206>