

# NEWCITYART

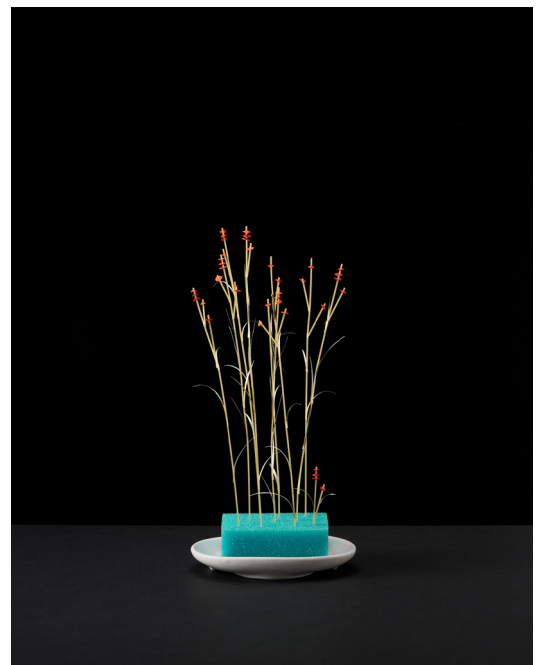
## Poetics that Heal Trauma: A Review of “Novel Ecosystems” at Saint Kate Arts Hotel in Milwaukee

BY RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS | June 26, 2024

Ecology. Technology. The very future of human civilization. These concerns, endemic to our emergent Anthropocene age, are among the anxieties and fears we live with everyday. Artists are reflecting these concerns in ever more experimental and impassioned ways. “Novel Ecosystems,” currently on view in the gallery at Saint Kate Arts Hotel in Milwaukee, is a tightly curated examination of this hyper-contemporary state of our world.

Artist Nina Katchadourian catches and collects the most idiosyncratic of juxtapositions. Her investigations have resulted in cross-dressing snakes and rats and car alarms replaced with bird calls, along with a project (highlighted in Artforum) of experimental and hilarious portraiture taken in airplane bathrooms. Katchadourian’s photographs in this exhibition illustrate a fictional utopian botany. The artist has sculpted fantastic plants from found materials—sponges, bits of colored plastic, and fake hair. The resultant photographs deliver high-caliber formalism echoing Dutch still-life paintings with their dark backgrounds and pops of color. The conceit of a woman-made, falsified nature calls our attention to ideas of authenticity and how we lean on the natural world for meaningful metaphors of our own device.

Greg Klassen offers potent paintings and assemblage that put the viewer directly into the midst of environmental anxiety. A loose sheet of Mylar depicts a color photograph of a beautifully blue underwater scene. The viewer can see dappled sunlight shining down from the surface, mottling the sandy water’s floor. Hung slightly askew in the middle of this image is a group of assembled plastic blister packs, emptied but for some accents of color from the original packaging. It is a simple but elegant descrip-



*Nina Katchadourian, “Fake Plant #7,” 2022, C-print, 28 1/2 x 21 1/8”/Photo: Saint Kate Arts Hotel*

tion of the state of the ocean’s waters. Interestingly, the artwork is quiet, even peaceful, like watching a quiet ocean creature floating lazily on the current. The experience was strange and off-putting, simultaneously terrible and beautiful. Next to this work is another painting that Klassen has buried within composting material. The painting is a rough square that echoes the blue of the underwater image, the canvas ragged and rotting. Action and process meld into a dirty blue abstraction.

Plants, and the care of and for the environment, are reflected in micro-interventions created by the Environmental Performance Agency. Faux voting posters advertise practices that democratize the world of plants. Prickly lettuce, horseweed and other pedestrian plants are elevated in status with statements such as "Visit Horseweed in the street," and "Align your hand with one leaf, then with another." These statements and corresponding QR codes on the poster bring viewers to the group's website, which asks, "In a time of pandemic crisis, how do we re-value what care means for all living beings?" This artist collective has a tongue-in-cheek attitude but a firm grounding in environmental equity.

The exhibition is fleshed out with elegant contributions by Katherine Clarke Langlands and Jennifer Angus. Langlands paints colorful acrylic abstractions on large chunks of driftwood installed on the wall and floor and floating from the ceiling. The broken and bent logs are festive, in a way, and have an expressionist authority. A large suspended work in fuchsia, green and gold is expansively titled "Everything." Jennifer Angus also pulls her material from the natural world in the form of insect carcasses. The artist sustainably culls insects from around the world and installs them in romantic vignettes under glass cloches. Interwoven with plants, collage and other ephemera, the vitrines display insects in classrooms, being lectured to, reading and otherwise interacting in anthropomorphic narratives.



Greg Klassen, "Untitled," 2024, found blister packs on mylar, 48" x 48"/Photo: Saint Kate Arts Hotel

"Novel Ecosystems" is on view at the gallery at Saint Kate Arts Hotel, 139 East Kilbourn, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, through July 7.