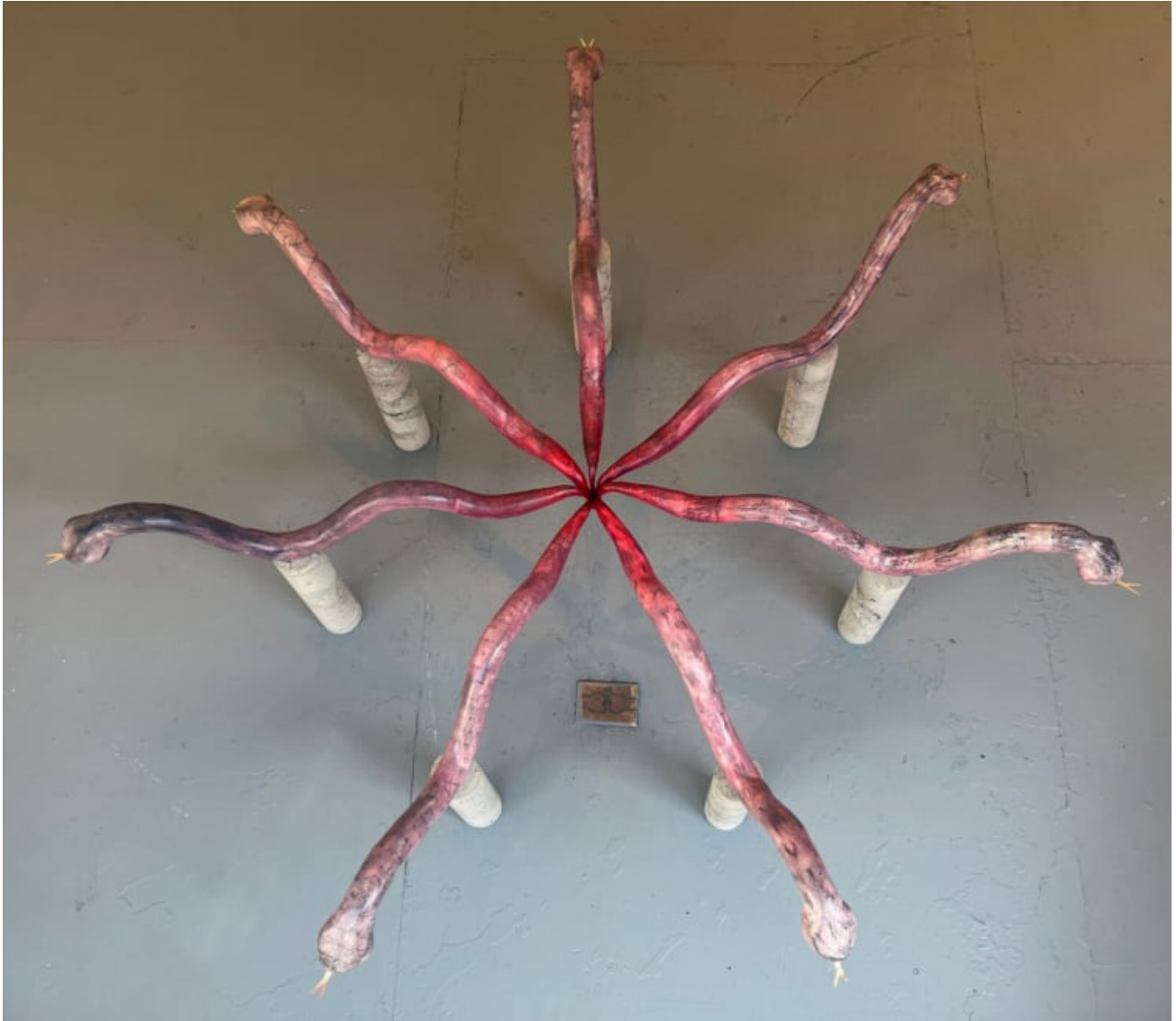


# Art review: Portland galleries put the natural world in a new context

[pressherald.com/2023/04/30/art-review-natural-world-at-center-of-gallery-shows-but-not-for-the-usual-reasons/](https://www.pressherald.com/2023/04/30/art-review-natural-world-at-center-of-gallery-shows-but-not-for-the-usual-reasons/)

By Jorge S. Arango

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Brian Smith, "7 Snakes," 2022 welded steel, foam, plaster, epoxy, charcoal, pigment, pierced brass, 66" x 66" x 11" *Photo by Carolyn Wachnicki*

Two current shows in Portland situate the environment and nature at the center of their theses.

## IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** “Evening Botanist”

**WHERE:** Space, 534-538 Congress St., Portland

**WHEN:** Through May 13

**HOURS:** Noon to 6 p.m. Thursday and Friday, noon to 4 p.m. Saturday

**ADMISSION:** Free

**INFO:** 207-828-5600, [space538.org](http://space538.org)

**WHAT:** “Deep Fake”

**WHERE:** Speedwell Projects, 630 Forest Ave., Portland

**WHEN:** Through Dec. 23

**HOURS:** Noon to 6 p.m. Thursday through Saturday

**ADMISSION:** Free

**INFO:** 207-805-1835, [speedwellprojects.com](http://speedwellprojects.com)

“Deep Fake,” an immersive installation by Greta Bank at Speedwell Projects, focuses on mass extinction as a cataclysmic forerunner to change. “Evening Botanist” at Space approaches the environment from various angles, including, according to a statement put together by co-curators Brian Smith and Kelsey Halliday Johnson, “queer ecology, ecofeminism, intersectional environmentalism, and naturalist education.”

The latter is a mouthful. But essentially, for me the exhibition also poses a larger question: What exactly does the word “natural” mean, and how do subjective interpretations of that concept affect what we do and do not value, who we embrace, and who we ostracize?

Take, for example, Smith’s two offerings: “7 Snakes” and “[Flower from] A Field of Pansies With Their Guards Up.” Smith is greatly moved by nature and grieves our increasing disconnection from it. More specifically, he is alarmed at society’s persistence – through such proposed legislation as banning drag shows or school books that discuss the fluidity of sexuality – in interpreting queerness as something “un-natural.”

The complexly constructed 5-foot pansy sculpture (it’s relevant that it is at once flexible and resilient), presents a flower whose name, of course, doubles as a gay slur. Yet Smith counters the perceived delicacy of both blossom and gay men by giving the pansy lethal-looking thorns. Likewise, “7 Snakes” portrays a creature that often repels or strikes fear in those humans who cannot square the concept of “natural” with such aberrance, most likely because snakes have received a bad rap since one of them screwed things up so badly in the Garden of Eden.

In this and “Pansies,” Smith seems to be interrogating the human religious construct of sin – of which LGBTQ people continue to be accused – in all its beauty and forbidden allure. That the number of asps corresponds to the seven deadly sins can hardly be a coincidence.

Though Owen McCarter was thinking more about the fleeting nature of time in his photographic installation, the sum of it can also be seen through a queer lens. Each image captures the ephemerality of a moment: two embracing boys signal the transience of youth, snow fleas around a paw print in the snow capture the brief life of this arthropod, a flash fire on ice that lasts seconds, and so on.



Brian Smith, “[Flower from] A Field of Pansies With Their Guards Up,” 2023, welded steel, copper-plated jewelers chain, grout, pigment, adhesive, epoxy putty, 60” x 18” x 18”  
*Photo by Carolyn Wachnicki*



Inkjet prints by Owner McCarter in "Evening Botanist" at Space. *Photo by Carolyn Wachnicki*



But by presenting situations that appear paradoxical – bugs in winter, fire on ice, etc. – McCarter makes us question what is “normal” and “natural.” These phenomena recontextualize seemingly anomalous occurrences in our environment, emphasizing the infinite natural diversity inherent to life on Earth, and pointing up the absurdity of misconstruing anything that arises from nature as a deviance.

“In Deity of Seeds, Manifestation, and Death,” Heather Flor Cron, who is of Andean descent, dries readily available vegetal materials – pears, lemons, lettuce, carrots, beets, etc. – into papyrus and arranges them on a wall. The markings connecting them can recall constellations or resemble maps of sacred Indigenous sites. In this way, Flor Cron mourns the symbiotic relationships First Peoples had with the land and its natural cycles, creating an alternative sense of place out of the grasp of the colonial powers that first stole, then settled native lands. “I want to plant seeds for a future where Black and Indigenous people are centered, valued and reinstated as ancestral caretakers of the land,” reads her statement.



Heather Flor Cron, “Deity of Seeds, Manifestation, and Death,” 2023 vegetable papyrus, risograph, 8” x 11” *Photo by Carolyn Wachnicki*





Greta Bank, "Deep Fake" *Photo by Scott Peterman*

The dome itself is printed on the exterior with imagery of lava flows, referencing a super volcano eruption over 400 million years ago that triggered a mass extinction. It's apocalyptic stuff for sure, especially as we seem to be hurtling these days toward another extinction, this one of our own making. But Bank sees this as a natural process – the universe renewing itself by clearing out old life for new life and, perhaps, new possibilities of consciousness.

Once inside, we see some telltale portents of environmental devastation that might not be apparent at first; cell towers, for instance, whose radiofrequency waves have raised concerns about causing everything from sterility and cancer to fundamental changes in our DNA. A lava-topped pizza is a more oblique reference to the dairy industry, predicted by some scientists as the first industry to collapse from environmental degradation.





A detail from inside Great Bank's immersive installation, "Deep Fake" *Photo by Scott Peterman*

A skeleton alludes to pronated burial practices, where a body is buried face down, which was considered a deviant form of interment in the Middle Ages. There are tardigrades, a microscopic eight-legged animal, and plant forms derived from 19th-century drawings that Bank has stylized into talismanic-looking objects. All of these speak to the idea of a fossil record that follows and chronicles mass extinction. Some of these organisms return (there are still humans and tardigrades, for example); others do not.

As Bank writes in her artist statement, "By embracing the destructive power and transformation of change, as studied in geologic time, the volcano is a portal for grief and reconciliation." It is also a cautionary reminder that humankind cannot dominate nature.

On a lighter note, in a side gallery is an installation by Eli Nixon, who also has an extension of this work in the Space show. It proposes a national holiday in honor of horseshoe crabs. The centerpiece is a video that is by turns serious and innocently hilarious. Nixon stands on a beach in "nature drag," which they describe at the Space show as "a process of basking in neither king nor queen, but a 3rd solidarity outside and in between – dragkin."



What this means is that they are wearing a horseshoe crab costume and waving celebratory flags out toward the ocean, and also mimicking the arthropod by crawling along the beach toward the water. It's a serious homage in its appreciation of how horseshoe crabs are exploited by science for research into cures for human diseases – all of which is talked about in rewritten lyrics to the 1980s Bonnie Tyler pop hit “Total Eclipse of the Heart,” which plays throughout the video. It's a nice place to end your visit after contemplating the weighty topics of Bank's “Deep Fake.”

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