

# Surface, Sample, Site

Víctor Ballesteros

Ramey Newell

Tara Nicholson

Deb Silver

Karen Zalamea



**G44**

Centre for  
Contemporary  
Photography

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## Cover image

Ramey Newell, *from the deep ground*, 59 x 76 inch giclee print, 2018

**Víctor Ballesteros** is an artist and filmmaker based in Vancouver. Through ultra-high-definition video, photography and writing, his current work explores materials used in the architecture of museums and galleries—such as plywood and drywall—and their relation to art display, colonial history, geopolitical competition and financial investment in North and South America. Ballesteros studied art and art history at Emily Carr University of Art + Design and the University of British Columbia and has received support from the BC Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts.

**Ramey Newell** is a filmmaker, photographer and artist based in British Columbia and Oregon. Newell holds a BFA in Photography from New Mexico State University and an MFA in Visual Art from the University of British Columbia and has shown work in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Europe and Australia. Newell was awarded the Stellar Award at Black Maria Film Festival in 2018 and won the Symbiosis competition at Imagine Science Film Festival in 2022. She teaches film studies, video production and documentary film at the UBC Okanagan.

**Tara Nicholson** is a photo-based artist whose practice explores ecological activism through a more-than-human lens. She has exhibited across Canada and internationally, with projects funded by the BC Arts Council and Canada Council for the Arts. Nicholson attended an eco-art residency at the Banff Centre in 2019 and was awarded the Künstlerhaus Dortmund Artist-in-Residence Award in 2017. She teaches at the University of Victoria and holds degrees from Toronto Metropolitan University and Concordia University. Nicholson is completing a PhD at the UBC Okanagan, which documents Arctic extinction and permafrost research—considering the role of storytelling in enacting change.

**Deb Silver** is a multimedia artist living and working on S'ólh Téméxw. Silver holds an MFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design and a BFA from the University of the Fraser Valley. Silver's art practice draws attention to the interconnection between Coast Salish Cultural Knowledge and Western science research. Silver has exhibited at The Reach Gallery Museum in Abbotsford, The Polygon Gallery in North Vancouver and was a finalist for the 2021 Philip B. Lind Emerging Artist Prize.

**Laurie White** (she/her) is a curator and writer based in Vancouver, unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. Her research explores ecological methodologies in art and theory—curating exhibitions and programs at Or Gallery, grunt gallery, Griffin Art Projects, the fifty fifty arts collective and Documenta 14. Recent publications include “Every Being is a Score for Another” in *Wetland Project: Explorations in Sound, Ecology and Post-Geographical Art*. She holds an MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies and is pursuing a PhD in Art History from the University of British Columbia.

**Karen Zalamea** is a Filipino-Canadian artist, educator and cultural worker based in Burnaby, on the unceded and ancestral territories of the Hən̓q̓əmin̓əŋ and Skwx̱wú7mesh speaking peoples. Her interdisciplinary practice is rooted in photography and critically considers methodologies, materiality and modes of presentation. Zalamea's work has received support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the BC Arts Council and Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec. Zalamea has attended artist residencies in the Philippines, Iceland and Canada and was the recipient of the 2023 Prefix Prize. Zalamea holds an MFA from Concordia University and a BFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

**Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography** is an artist-run centre committed to supporting diverse approaches to photographic and image-based practices through exhibitions, education programs and facilitating artistic production. Gallery 44 provides space and context for meaningful dialogue between artists and publics. Together, we offer an entry point to explore the artistic, cultural, historic, social and political implications of the image in our ever-expanding visual world.

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401 Richmond St W. Suite 120  
Toronto, ON, Canada M5V 3A8

416.979.3941  
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# Aesthetics of Contact: An Eco-Materialist Photography

Curated by Laurie White

The idea of the sample allows artists to link the surface of a photograph to a particular site in ways that supplement and complicate the representational image. As Kim Knowles writes in her history of experimental film practices, “it is precisely through the attention to surfaces, namely the photochemical substrate that registers the indexical trace of a physical encounter, that materialist film opens up a language of perceptual complexity.”<sup>1</sup> While critically addressing the historical role of photography in modern, scientific paradigms of vision linked to colonial administration and violence, the works in this exhibition also explore photography’s special capacity to express the fluid agencies of non-human natures through an “aesthetics of contact”<sup>2</sup> aided by the medium’s particular materialities, whether chemical or crystalline. These works draw attention to the material surfaces of photographs by creating “multiple layers, tangible surfaces, proximal views and haptic images”<sup>3</sup> in which microbes, plants, fungi and other critters participate in rendering their own images.

Ramey Newell’s photo-series *Manifest Obscura* (2018-19) consists of pinhole-camera photographs of landscapes in the American Midwest. Newell takes a soil or water sample at the site of each photograph; in the photo lab, the negatives are brushed with a coat of agar gel and seeded with the samples. When developed and enlarged, the prints reveal the spectral forms of microbial and fungal growth patterns, which appear to float across the sky or coat the image surface with an oily sheen. The hand of the artist is also detectable as painterly brush strokes from where the agar was applied. Thus, while fused into a single image surface, multiple layers emerge from the prints, evincing the collaborative process between land, technology, artist and microbe.

By reintroducing unseen microbial inhabitants to these apparently empty places, Newell works against the historical formulation of the American landscape sublime and its instrumentalization as colonial propaganda. This gesture acknowledges the erasure of Indigenous lifeways that pristine, depopulated landscape images have perpetuated. At the same time, her works deconstruct the

singular viewing subject; as the surface of the inoculated image resonates with our bodily microbiome, this prompts the reflection that, as Newell states, “we are all haunted by the presence within us of other beings and their shadows, their material traces. We were never individuals.”<sup>4</sup> In this context, enigmatic titles such as *from the deep ground*, taken from the journals of settler explorers, are re-framed as potential openings onto this shimmering more-than-human world, even as they acknowledge the violent history of Manifest Destiny.<sup>5</sup>

The crinkled textures in Newell’s *sharp and sibilant murmur* could be read as a visual expression of the mycelial networks that link forest trees into multi-species collaborative networks. Such interactions with “rooted peoples”<sup>6</sup> are at the heart of Deb Silver’s intimate photographs of coastal forest ecologies in S’ólh Téméxw,<sup>7</sup> printed on papers dyed with lichen pigments. Through their colour and scent these dyes offer an alternative form of botanical representation, one that links to techniques of harvesting and dying in Salish weaving practices. In this way, Silver’s works tap into forms of traditional ecological knowledge passed through Stó:lō communities since time immemorial.

If scientific research is only recently confirming what these communities have long held to be true—that plants, fungi and other non-human beings are sentient and can communicate<sup>8</sup>—Silver’s process restages these entanglements to supplement and complicate the photographic image. While her precise photographs show a teeming society of mosses, lichens, fronds and roots, the dyes materially index these lifeforms in another way, tangibly linking the forest floor to the surface of the image. Here, the roles of photographer and gatherer are entwined; practices of observation and harvesting inform each other, reciprocally. That which had previously seemed to be outside of the image—the photographer—is reintroduced to the frame through this conjunction of image and material trace, figured as a site of encounter between multi-species societies.

Karen Zalamea’s *Taro* (2023) also entangles photographic technologies with material signifiers through an iterative

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1 Kim Knowles, *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 42.

2 Ibid, 17.

3 Ibid, 25.

4 Ramey Newell, “What We Might Yet Endure: making art in the wake of the world,” (MFA major paper, University of British Columbia: Vancouver, 2019), np.

5 Manifest Destiny is the 19th century ideological claim that the continued territorial expansion of the boundaries of the United States westward to the Pacific and beyond was inevitable. Britannica Encyclopedia, “Manifest Destiny”: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Manifest-Destiny>

6 Deb Silver, “Artist Talk” at The Reach Gallery Museum, Abbotsford (April 15, 2022): <https://youtu.be/zxylCqN52h0>

7 S’ólh Téméxw is the halq’eméylem name for the shared asserted territory of the Stó:lō people (Fraser Valley, BC).

8 Suzanne W. Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021).

9 Kumar, M., Bhardwaj, R, “Wetting characteristics of Colocasia esculenta (Taro) leaf and a bioinspired surface thereof,” *Sci Rep* 10, 935 (2020).

10 Ann Garascia, “Impressions of Plants Themselves”: Materializing Eco-Archival Practices with Anna Atkins’s Photographs of British Algae,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (2019), 294.

process. Zalamea used a found scanning electron microscope image of a taro leaf's superhydrophobic, water repellent surface topography to produce a cyanotype on cotton sateen, which was exposed to sunlight and developed in the rain. Zalamea then scanned, enlarged and printed the cyanotype image as a grid to produce an immersive, haptic texture in an oceanic shade of blue.

Both the electron microscope image and the cyanotype process are markers in the history of the replication of plant life. Studies of taro leaf structure are currently being used in the development of 'bioinspired' surfaces with potential applications in water-harvesting technologies.<sup>9</sup> In 1843, the English botanist and photographer Anna Atkins took up the recently invented cyanotype to make illustrations of watery seaweeds. As Ann Garascia writes in relation to Atkins' work, cyanotypes "are capable of memorializing the intensities and movements of an ecosystem that bundle together for an intensely specific, and ephemeral, moment in environmental time."<sup>10</sup> While Zalamea figuratively re-grounds the deracinated taro specimen through the materiality of the cyanotype process, she transfers the cyanotype to the digital realm in a further iteration. As *Taro* carries the traces of these accumulated transformations, it emulates the "technological forms of replication and duplication"<sup>11</sup> fundamental to the conditions of cultural production in the 21st century.

In Víctor Ballesteros's video work *Chilean Garden* (2020), we encounter a botanical garden not as a picturesque landscape, but as a series of closely cropped, high-definition shots of plants and their accession tags, interspersed with inverted-colour scans of the institution's archival records. By focussing on a collection of Chilean plants growing in a Canadian institution—the Van Dusen Botanical Garden in Vancouver—Ballesteros brings forward both the histories of colonial exploration and plant collection in the Americas, and the contemporary economic entanglements of British Columbia and Chile through the forestry industry.

In this work, the motif of the accession tag<sup>12</sup> acts as a conceptual hinge to explore the institutional framework of the botanical garden as part of an 'exhibitionary order' of museum collection and display.<sup>13</sup> Tracing how the logic of the world-as-exhibition was part of a widespread cultural turn in 19th century Europe, historian Timothy Mitchell writes, "the consolidation of the global hegemony of the

West, economically and politically, can be connected . . . to all the new machinery for rendering up and laying out the meaning of the world, so characteristic of the imperial age."<sup>14</sup> This 'machinery' extends to *Chilean Garden*'s two-channel presentation, which cites the legacy of the double slide lecture—pioneered by art historian Heinrich Wölfflin—that allowed a viewer to extract scientific facts from art through comparison while also enjoying the feeling of being transported to another place and time.<sup>15</sup> As such, *Chilean Garden* reveals the continuity of 'exhibitionary' techniques between seemingly disparate disciplines and institutions.

Tara Nicholson's photo series *Pleistocene Park* (2019) documents climate scientists in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), eastern Siberia, as they study and remediate the rapidly changing permafrost landscape. By reintroducing grazing animals to a 144 square kilometre area, the experimental rewilding project Pleistocene Park aims to geo-engineer a savanna-like grassland similar to the Mammoth Steppe ecosystem, which was dominant in the Arctic 14500 years ago,<sup>16</sup> as a "nature-based solution" to mitigate permafrost loss and climate change.

Nicholson's intimate portraits of people and places expose the laborious and precarious work that must be undertaken for such aspirations to accrue. In these works, the act of collecting samples and taking measurements—acts usually obscured in the scientific presentation of abstract data products—is made directly visible, along with the specificity of the sites. Through the journalistic image, Nicholson upholds what feminist science scholar Donna Haraway terms "situated knowledge," the faithful account of a shared "real" world that is nevertheless always partial, local and embodied.<sup>17</sup> Here, documentary photography also appears as a kind of sampling, a testimony to the efforts of these scientists to "atone for past ecological disasters"<sup>18</sup> through a speculative commitment to the future.

While each of the artists in *Surface, Sample, Site* incorporate the "subversive effects"<sup>19</sup> of reflexivity into their work, these effects differ depending on the specific configurations of image technologies, material signifiers and politics of place they invoke. Image surfaces become the meeting place for complex interactions that entangle artists and material forms with the more-than-human world while ceaselessly questioning the limits and capacities of the photographic medium.

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11 John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*, (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 15.

12 An accession tag number shows the year and order in which a plant was collected. The same numerical format is used to catalog objects in museum collections.

13 Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order," (1989) in *Grasping the World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).

14 Mitchell, "Orientalism," 442.

15 Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History's History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1994), 114.

16 The Pleistocene is the geological epoch that lasted from c. 2.58 million to 11,700 years ago, spanning the Earth's most recent period of repeated glaciations.

17 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575-99.

18 Tara Nicholson, "Agents of Change: Documenting Arctic Rewilding within the Anthropocene," *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 2, no. 2 (Dec 2021): 242.

19 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 8.





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1. Karen Zalamea, *Taro*, 65 x 85 inch archival inkjet print, 2023

2. Tara Nicholson, *Exposed Permafrost Research Site, Duvannyi Yar, Sakha Republic*, 40 x 40 inch archival pigment print, 2019  
 3. Deb Silver, *Untitled*, silver gelatin on fiber paper using lichen dye, 2023  
 4. Víctor Ballesteros, *Chilean Garden*, video still, 2020