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Madi, Halim. "Visual Artists Bring a Gentle Rewiring to Santa Barbara." *Santa Barbara Independent*, January 26, 2022.

Santa Barbara Independent



Diana Thater's "Untitled (Butterfly video wall #1)" | Credit: Brian Forrest

In the exhibition *Mediated Nature*, currently on view in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art's Ala Story Gallery, three contemporary artists tap digital screens to conjure singular experiences of nature. The journey begins with Diana Thater's "Untitled (Butterfly video wall #1)" (1998), an installation that splays a single butterfly over the screens of six television monitors laid on the gallery floor.

Thater, an animal rights activist, is not trying to pin the butterfly. This grounding isn't a restriction but an invitation to an intimate conversation. And Thater's fragmentation of the insect is not a dissection. Instead, it multiplies and glorifies the creature in the same way that something genuinely newsworthy appears on screens across the nation. By deconstructing the butterfly, Thater demands an additional effort from the viewer. As I watched Thater's butterfly flap its wings across the work's six screens, my mind — used to screens showing bodies in their entirety and movement in its continuity — had to adjust and re-attune its perception. Standing in the gallery alone on a Friday morning, I seemed to be involved in a small ritual of love. By piecing the butterfly's separate images together, I felt connected to its unique nature. Thater's decomposition tasks us with reconstructing nature — albeit in an unnatural, tech-assisted way — and thus engages us in a reparative conversation with the natural world. This process invites us to reconsider how we've approached nature previously.

Taiwan artist Wu Chi-Tsung's "still-life" videos of yellow flowers challenge our media consumption habits at a different level. Chi-Tsung enacts a faux-pas in an entertainment landscape where plants are mere mute extras meant to signify exoticism. His shots linger on a stationary plant for more than six minutes. In his

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work, the medium of video is camouflaged as painting. Although celebrating the mundane can be an oversubscribed concept, the elaborate care in Chi-Tsung's work — the crispness of the colors, the subtle mist-like atmosphere enveloping the plants — bends time. The viewer wonders, "Have I been watching this flower for six minutes or 20?"

When the medium changes, so does the message. Chi-Tsung's "Still Life 012 — Buttercup Tree" carves new depths within our experience of mundanity. A shivering leaf becomes a noteworthy event, and mist traveling slowly along a plant's wet roots becomes an erotic experience.

While Thater's and Chi-Tsung's works employ nature as source material, Petra Cortright leverages a different palette. The artifacts of the web (GIFs, memes, photos, and videos) serve as material for her pieces. The result feels eerie in a Web 1.0 way. The pixels aren't brisk, and the arrangement is messy. Yet somehow, Cortright's digital world feels more familiar than today's Internet. It's imperfect and hence more relatable and inviting — like nature! Cortright's real feat, however, is to have reproduced in painting what our minds likely do in thought. When we think of a landscape similar to the one that Cortright's "geometry formulas_gleitschirmfliegen 'GOLF III harlequin'" [CQ] portrays, we mash sparse memories with the Internet archive to render a faithful representation.

In her essay "On Being Translated," Susan Sontag broadened the definition of translation by exploring its etymology: "To translate," Sontag wrote, "is still to lead something across a gap, to make something go where it was not." *Mediated Nature* is a double tour de force of translation. First, these artists translate nature by fragmenting, slowing, and digitizing it. Next, they translate digital media. Because a translation is always a debatable point of view, the screens transmitting nature's message become suspect. *Mediated Nature* walks our bodies through an investigative conversation with these estranged partners towards a gentle and necessary rewiring.