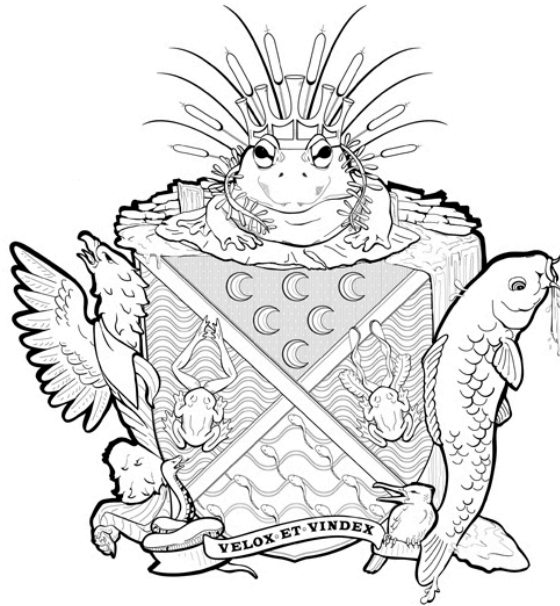


# BOMBLOG

Marina Zurkow makes art about the coexistence of the natural world and the human world. Katy Gray spoke with her about her 146 hour video piece, the oil industry, and the patterns found in the overlap between nature and culture.



American Bullfrog from a series of 12 prints, "Heraldic Crests for Invasive Species" 2011. 16" x 20" Letterpress edition.

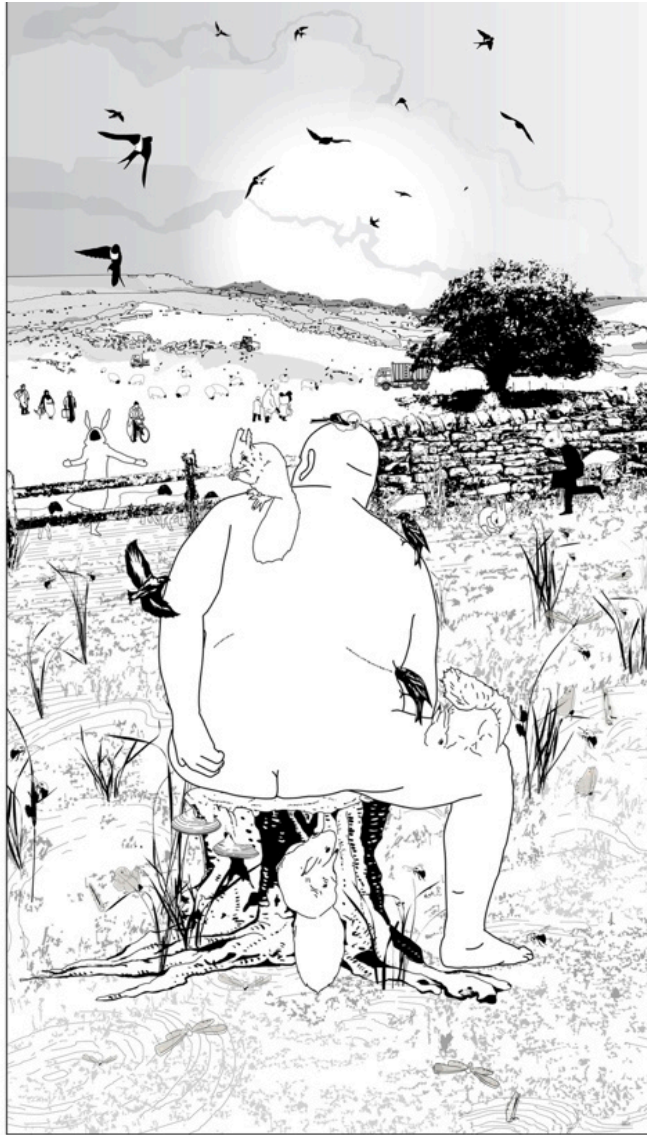
Marina Zurkow and I met at a birthday party for a mutual friend at a restaurant on Grand street in Williamsburg a few blocks from where she lives and makes her work. She was talking about a recent trip to NYU's new digs in Abu Dhabi, the oil industry, and an upcoming residency in Texas. As my people are petrologists in Texas and Oklahoma I promptly gave her my mother's email address. I thereafter much enjoyed being cc'd into their brief correspondence, especially when the men my mother works with were brought into the conversation. It was just a few exchanges between three or four strangers but it was enough to get me thinking about Marina's work and how it is not only about the way humans interact with their environments but also about how we interact with each other when our interests conflict—when we are confronted with conversations we avoid having with certain people.

She is an artist looking for trouble, good trouble. Her humor and intelligence, along with a healthy attitude towards our inevitable demise, allow her to navigate those who might otherwise be unwilling toward uncomfortable yet important conversations.

**KG** Your more recent animations unfold slowly over a long period of time, would you explain, in layman's terms, how they work and how it is that no two viewings are the same?

**MZ** The Mesocosm series is a new strategy—each work is long in duration and recombines perpetually. Chance determines order, density, and interrelationships. Like my previous pieces, these works have no beginning or end. But because change now happens at a more glacial pace, and can be radical over time, the works are intended to be seen in public places where people gather or pass through frequently, or to be lived with like a painting—in living rooms or meeting spaces. One might become invested over time in the fate of the protagonists on a summer's eve, and be surprised 72 hours later when it's snowing and the animated field is full of refugees.

*Mesocosm (Northumberland UK)* portrays the moors of Northern England in a year-long landscape cycle, determined by a simple probability equation. Over 146 hours, a year transpires. A cast of roughly 150 characters and weather phenomena may come out on to the landscape stage at any time, depending on their assignment. The year is broken into seasons (36.5 hours), which are broken into months (12 hours), and further into dawn/day/dusk/night. A creature may only appear on a June night, and there may be only a 2% chance that it will come out at all. Sometimes nothing happens for minutes on end, and other times there's a party on screen. The piece was drawn by hand, frame-by-frame, using Flash and a Wacom tablet, and the programming was done by Flash wiz and artist Veronique Brossier.



Mesocosm (Northumberland UK), production stills, 2011

**KG** What prompted you to deviate from the shorter format you were working with before? Or, what got you on to this idea of working with geological time?

**MZ** I stopped being interested in making pieces that worked like music videos, and wanted to make works people could live with. For the past few years, I was already working with silence, a static camera, no edits, and seamless loops that were dense enough to provide hypnotic interest over repeated viewings. But the more I made ambient worlds, the less it made sense to author every move. I wanted to push what it meant to have a long relationship with an unfolding landscape, and surprise myself at the recombinant cast of actants.

The computer does unfathomable time really well; it also performs unpredictable or idiosyncratic time, and procedural unfolding. I want to use data as narrative fodder, crafting narrative time that reflects the data but doesn't illustrate it.

**KG** While you were in Northumberland you also started making work around invasive species. What has that come to?

**MZ** I am currently creating 12 heraldic crests for the major invasive species of Northern England. I developed a suite of projects with the title *Friends and Enemies*, through ISIS Arts in Newcastle, that include these crests, *Mesocosm (Northumberland, UK)*, and a dinner composed of invasive species. I'm considering ways to spur a conversation around the relationship between our nativist views towards invasives and anti-immigrant rhetoric. You hear it in England, from arguments in the House of Lords regarding the "Vulgar American Gray Squirrel" problem, to the British National Party skinhead blogs where explicit text and image associations are made between Asian knotweed and Islamic terrorists. So there's an intense space to work in using the intimacy of food, and the visual languages of power. Northern England was disputed territory for four hundred years, that spawned heaps of castles and family coats of arms, so this language is familiar. The crests are a very systematized and narrative language; for the *Invasives' Crests*, I (and my assistants Marco Castro and Ellen Anne Burtner) figured out a grammar that's based on traditional crests but that encodes information about the animal's country of origin, its introduction, victories, allies and enemies.

**KG** Are the ties between invasive species and anti-immigrant rhetoric something that you see more of in England? Are we having these types of arguments?

**MZ** We are. For example, hunting communities use chat forums, and you hear things about feral hogs and Mexicans. Grackles and Mexicans. Eucalyptus trees. Asian knotweed and Asian carp. In fact the book, *American Perceptions of Immigrant and Invasive Species: Strangers on the Land* by Peter Coates (2006) addresses this phenomenon in the US.

**KG** There's a lot of humor in your work—it's apocalyptic, sure, but it's funny too. How do you manage that?

**MZ** I'm a positive pessimist. I'm definitely a pessimist. But I think you have to make the best of it. And nobody will engage in a conversation with you if you're a black cloud.

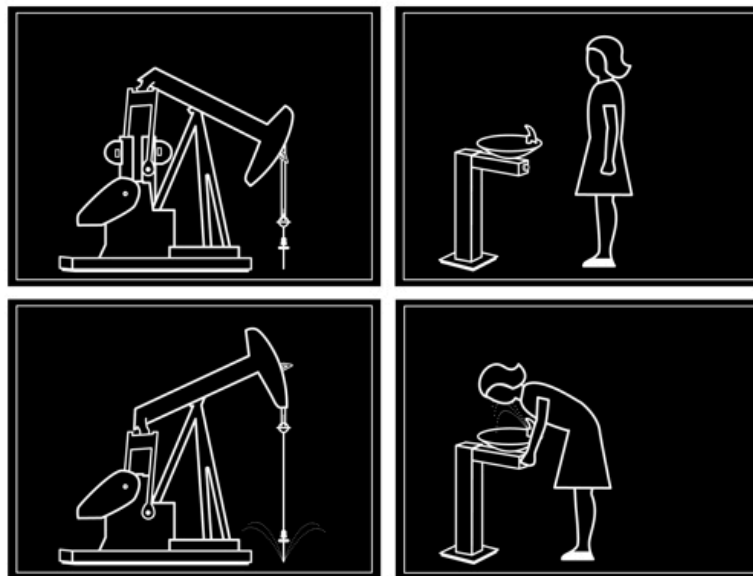
**KG** Right, it's a "Laugh and the world laughs with you" kind of thing. Speaking of no one engaging in a conversation with you, let's talk about your time in Texas.

**MZ** In January 2011 I took a two week research/road trip through West Texas to meet naturalists, oil men, cattlemen, activists, and so on. And yes, it took a while to get people to talk to me.

The trip was the first step in making a new exhibition focused on The Permian Basin of West Texas that will open March 2012 at DiverseWorks in Houston with a side project for Aurora Picture Show. The show will be called *Necrocracy* and will include a new *Mesocosm* piece, which centers on the Wink Sink II, one of two sinkholes that opened up about 60 miles south of Midland Texas. The oil company keeps putting up fences so people won't swim in it and it's a little monster, it breaks down the fences and just keeps growing. If you happened upon it, you would think it's a delicious anomalous geological event that occurred over time in some "natural" way. The Wink Sink II is reminiscent of the swimming holes depicted in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. I might end up utilizing that, making connections to Art/Historical moments—to give me some footholds.

**KG** Theoretically?

**MZ** Theoretically connecting, but also because they resonate. Leigh Bowery, the naked man in *Mesocosm (Northumberland UK)* was such an incredible creature, such an incredible man, and an icon of the Other kind of England, an alter England. Lucien Freud, who painted the denuded Bowery, is a master of flesh and corporeality, and that's how Bowery ended up in the first ??Mesocosm??—a capricious Green Man. In Northern England people will recognize themselves because Bowery really looks like a Geordie (a native of Northeast England).



The Thirsty Bird, storyboard, 2011

The Wink Sink II is suggestive as a Pandora's box. There is an extremely uneasy relationship between oil and water in this landscape: there are periodic severe droughts; the Permian Basin/Southern High Plains was not inhabited until European settlements, because it can't sustain life on a daily basis; the oil industry uses serious amounts of ground water to drill; and there is the always-present threat of contaminated water from drilling. ( And now, all of this information about chemical use in hydraulic fracturing is emerging).

In the Permian Basin, oil is made of compressed marine life that died and disappeared 250 million years ago in the Permian extinction. There's a funny poetry between hydrocarbon transmogrification, and the sticky permanence of the things that we create out of oil, like plastic bags, that have this unbelievably long shelf life.



Mesocosm (Wink, Texas), sketch, 2011

The new *Mesocosm* will be a breathing hole or vortex that sucks things in and blows them out. There will be plastic bags, some other petroleum products, birds, some migratory animals. And maybe mutant, Boschian people with some kind of plastic bag fetish? I'm thinking of people engaged in situations like Tino Sehgal's hours-long kiss. Part of me wants no people at all. This total absence of people—

**KG** That'd be pretty true to the area.

**MZ** And true to this idea of geological time and my feeling about our shelf-life as a species. We really shouldn't be around that much longer. We've been around a long time. I'm not even being apocalyptic— I'm just being. . . .geological.

**KG** You're just being a positive pessimist. We've had a good run. What else besides the *Wink Sink Mesocosm* will be presented at *DiverseWorks*?

**MZ** I'm working on 200 drawings called *The Petroleum Manga* that enumerate the applications of oil. Manga, was the term used to describe cursive, whimsical drawings in Japan in the late 18th century. Well-known artists were making these beautiful how-to books; Hokusai made fifteen volumes of Manga that are arranged by subject—pages and pages devoted to rock formations or to mice who carry things. I plan to make a book of petroleum-based things (dolls, ski jackets, flip flops, radios, water bottles, etc.) organized by chemical. I'll make cheap, large prints on Tyvek (a petroleum product) and paper the gallery with them.

I sent a questionnaire to the head of the geology department at the University of Houston asking him to describe, as vividly as he could, what the drill bit sees when it goes through the rock hopefully towards its target of oily sands. I'm interested in how a geologist sees. And how you visualize what you can't see. The oil industry is a highly imaginative, speculative field. Even with new technology—the equivalent of a 3D sonogram—it is still largely speculative and requires an imaginative gambler's temperament to put that drill into the ground (for \$700,000). It's crazy. I'm working with Dan Shiffman, my colleague at ITP to create the works in Processing, using code and computer-drawn strata.

And I plan to fabricate hazmat suits for toddlers. A little army of them.

Lastly, I am making an audio piece with Burr Williams, the naturalist that I met in Midland who created the phenomenal Sibley Nature Center. A Nature Center in Midland is an odd thought. He's my all-time, ideal kind of naturalist: "Nature" is indiscriminate, and everywhere. He's training an army of local citizen naturalists to document the Llano Estacado—the local name for the Southern High Plains. He has a fantastic essay, "The Ecology of an Oil Pad"—birds that nest in the moving parts of the pump jack, and creatures that can tolerate hydrogen sulfide gas and extreme exposure.

**KG** You make work about humans and their relationship to "animals, plants and weather." As a native New Yorker, and someone who has never lived outside of the city for any extended period of time, how do you approach nature?

**MZ** My mother was a touring concert pianist. When she was home, my parents and I consistently watched *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* on TV. This is a very happy memory, lying on their bed watching this show about African wildlife. My mother died when I was 17, and the following spring, my father took me out of school for two weeks and we went on a safari to East Africa, because my mother had always wanted to do this. So I have a very bourgeois, metropolitan relationship to capital "N" Nature and this very remote view of how special it is.

As an adult I got into taxonomy and naming things. To name something was to know it. I became obsessed with identifying things, and still am. I have a languaged, distanced, mediated relationship to the rest of the natural world. But as I have gotten deeper into critical texts and looking at the network of moving parts that constitutes the world, something's happened that is still cerebral but really altered the way that I think. Eco-criticism, Latour, Deleuze have really challenged the humanistic, enlightenment relation to nature. I think that this is in confluence with network culture, systems design and computational capacities—distributed networks have really allowed us to consider repositioning ourselves within the world. It gives me tremendous comfort to see us as a cog in a much bigger universe of lateral connections.

**Marina Zurkow makes psychological narratives about humans and their relationship to animals, plants and the weather. These take the form of multi-channel videos, customized multi-screen computer pieces, animated cartoons, interactive mobile works, and pop objects. She is the recipient of a 2011 Guggenheim Fellowship.**

**The exhibition Marina Zurkow: Friends Enemies and Others opens Sept 17, 2011 at The Montclair Art Museum, Montclair NJ, curated by Alexandra Schwartz.**

**Katy Gray is an associate web editor for BOMB Magazine.**